

Love one another (Rev. Wendy Sellers) 19 May 2019

As probably you know, I split my working week between my curacy and my job as a primary school teacher.

For most of my teaching career I've been a class teacher, but when I started to study for ordained ministry, I went down to three days teaching. I now teach two days, Monday and Tuesday.

My new role involves covering other teachers' non-contact or planning, preparation and assessment time. I teach six different classes in those two days and for half of those the teacher has asked me to teach Religious Education. I wonder why?

I particularly enjoy teaching Year 5 who, at aged 10 or 11, have lots to say and tons of questions. In year 5 we study both Christianity and Judaism and this term we've been looking at the theme of justice.

We started out by considering what law is. Then we moved onto rules and how those are different from law. Now we have moved onto commandments in the Old Testament and how those are different again.

Using scripture, we have together built up a picture of what justice means to God and his people. The OT has hundreds of references to justice, making it plain that the concept of justice is integral to the person of God.

Very helpfully, scripture tells the Jews who they need to especially ensure gets justice. The individuals and groups who might most need support.

This includes widows and fatherless children– who needed the economic support of a male family member to survive.

It included the poor – provision was made in a number of ways including farmers leaving alone the edges of fields at harvest, so the poor to gather or glean the leftover grain.

It included the blind – who had no way of providing for themselves beyond begging.

It included the prisoner, the foreigner and the stranger.

These commandments are about social justice and fairness, and not about law at all really.

These are ancient commandments from God on how we should treat others – and most especially the vulnerable.

Who might these people be now, in our society?

They might include:

A struggling single parent.

Those on a low income or on benefits

The child in care or in the youth offending system

The long-term sick or disabled

The prisoner of conscience, refugee and asylum seeker.

In today's reading from Acts [Acts 11. 1-18] we have heard Peter telling us of a vision in which we learn that God's message is for everyone. Not just for the Jews but for us gentiles. That must mean that God's commandments apply, too. That the benefits of being one of God's children applies to gentiles and Jews alike.

But with the benefits come the responsibility.

The Jewish approach to social justice, based on God's clear message, applies to Jew and non-Jew alike.

We all know about the 10 commandments, but actually the Jewish scripture, which we know as the Old Testament, contains hundreds, if not thousands, of commandments. Jesus, however, decided to simplify things somewhat, and Year 5 and I will be looking at that this week.

We will read Matthew chapter 22, we will hear that a lawyer asks Jesus a question to test him:

“Teacher”, says the lawyer, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Jesus answers, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus is saying that if we both love God and love our neighbours, then all the other commandments fall into place.

And, of course, when further challenged with the question ‘Who is our neighbour?’ Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan.

Our neighbour, it seems, is anyone, even our perceived enemy.

However, in this new commandment, which we hear in today’s Gospel, Jesus goes beyond the ‘neighbour’ to our being; instructed to love as he loves.

We are being commanded to love as God loves.

To attempt that, we need to have some understanding of how God loves. That isn’t easy – how can we possibly ever explain the love of God? But we do have the words of the Bible to help us and we have our experiences of God, which might give us a glimpse of what God’s love is like.

So, how does God love?

I came up with the following words – you may have other better ones.

Unconditionally

Extravagantly

Eternally

Sacrificially

Because God loves us so much, that he chooses to demonstrate that love in the ministry and eventually the death of Jesus Christ, who is God made human.

There is no greater sacrifice than dying for those you love.

So what Jesus is asking of us here is a whole lot deeper and harder than the neighbour thing. Goodness knows loving your neighbour is hard enough. Loving yourself is hard enough. But we are being told to go even further – to try to live out God's love in our lives.

Our God is a God of justice. Loving our neighbour, loving as He loves, must include how we can do our part to bring social justice to those around us.

Loving our neighbour, loving as he loves, means we also need to give them the greatest gift of all – the chance to know something of God's love for them.

In last week's Year 5 RE lesson I showed the class a clip from the BBC about a primary school in Great Yarmouth. Our coastal towns are surprisingly places where there is often great social need.

This school had, I think without any particular plan, started to try to meet the non-educational needs of its children and their families. They had a foodbank, and ran cookery classes to help families learn to prepare cheap nutritious food. The librarian gave free hair-cuts. They put money on families' electric and gas cards.

There was a deep unmet need. Now, I wish I could tell you this not true of families local to us, but I'd be lying.

At my own school in a prosperous Hertfordshire village we hand out uniform, fund trips, provide breakfast, allow families to use our computers to fill out online forms or even to do homework together. We have bought children shoes, provided free childcare and given lifts to hospital appointments. All because we saw a need and a way we could meet it.

Such need is on our church doorstep. At our Away Weekend, Kath Oates led a workshop, talking about our parish profile and the social needs of our parish. Surprisingly, we actually have one of the most impoverished wards in East Herts within our parish boundary.

If we are going to love these neighbours, and if we are going to love them as Jesus loves, what sacrifices are we going to have to make as individuals and as a church to reach out to those people?

What does God's social justice look like for those who need our support and help?

And these people need to know they are loved by God and need us to show them that and to tell them that.

How are we going to ensure that God's message reaches them?

I don't have the answers. I am just contributing to our on-going dialogue. But I do think it is increasingly urgent that we engage with this issue.

Today the Bishop visited St Mary's. He is constantly reminding people that we are called to Live God's love, to transform communities and, hopefully on the way, make new disciples.

That is the Diocesan mission, it is our mission, and it seems really appropriate to remind ourselves of that today.