

Love of neighbour – and safeguarding

St. Brandon's

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18; Matt. 22: 34-46

25 October 2020

Were 'memory verses' part of your Christian upbringing? Well, here's today's memory verse, which is not from either of our two readings (sorry!):

'That your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best' Phil. 1: 9-10. Repeat after me! We'll come back to that.

You'll see there's a link with 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' in both our readings, but also that this memory verse develops that fundamental commandment, acknowledging that it may not always be completely obvious what love demands. We'll need knowledge and insight to help in determining what is for the best. It suggests that 'love your neighbour' may not be completely straightforward.

However, it doesn't appear that way if we look at the most obvious working out of the commandment to love your neighbour in the 'Good Samaritan' parable of Jesus in Luke's gospel (10: 25-37). There it's very clear that 'my neighbour' is the one who is in need whoever they may be, whoever I may be. My love for my neighbour is to take precedence over all other considerations, however pressing they may be. My love for neighbour demands my resources of time and possibly money, but also the resource of my compassion. In the particular case of the Good Samaritan, the person in need has been a victim of a violent attack by robbers who have left him half dead, and so the parable draws our attention particularly to those who are victims of the deliberate cruelty of others, but maybe also those who are victims of the circumstances of life – economic hardship, illness, the failure of close relationships and so on.

So, on that basis, it would seem it's all very simple *in principle*, and the difficulty is only *in practice*. Do we have sufficient love to live up to the demands – to be holy as the Lord our God is holy (Leviticus 19: 2)?

But I don't think it is that simple; I'm not sure 'love your neighbour' is completely straightforward. So let me complicate it by raising two issues that the parable of the Good Samaritan leaves hanging. First, what about the robbers? They are the perpetrators of violence against the victim, but they get no further consideration. And while we might hope that they were caught and punished – that justice was done – the parable of the Good Samaritan might also cause us to ask whether they are our neighbours too. They are also in need, even though it is a need for amendment of life and, hopefully, for rehabilitation back into society. They might, particularly from the perspective of the victim, be enemies rather than neighbours, of course. But then the gospel also enjoins us to love our enemies. Mmm.

The other issue that is left hanging in the parable is what to do about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho? If nothing is done, then these same or other robbers would likely continue to exploit the vulnerable. So what should be done to make the road one that is safe, a safe space to travel on? Does love make demands of us in that direction too? Mmm.

Now, you might have already guessed where this sermon is going by my use of the terms 'victim', 'perpetrator', 'violence', 'vulnerable' and 'safe space'. What I really want to talk about this morning

is safeguarding – but it does seem to me that ‘love of neighbour’ is a good way into that, and that safeguarding is a good way of illustrating some of the issues that ‘love of neighbour’ raises.

But why safeguarding? Well, as you’ll probably know, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) has just published its final report into the Anglican Church in England and Wales. So, it’s topical. Indeed two weeks ago was Safeguarding Sunday, which we missed though not by much if we count today. But also I, along with a number of others here, have recently been updating my Diocesan Safeguarding training. So it’s all rather at the front of my mind, such that this seemed an opportune time to talk about it.

One of the things that the training reminded me of is the statement in the House of Bishops’ safeguarding policy that says, ‘the care and protection of children, young people and vulnerable adults involved in Church activities is the responsibility of the whole Church. Everyone who participates in the life of the Church has a role to play in promoting a Safer Church for all’.

So this is something that affects all of us, not just those of us who happen to interface with it directly. And therefore it’s something that we should talk about explicitly. And it is, as I’ve already indicated in thinking of it as being related to love of neighbour, something that should both reflect and challenge our faith.

I have to confess that, over the years, as the Church has responded to the terrible abuse that has been conducted by members of the Church as it has been made public, it’s become a bit of a paperwork exercise. I became the Parish Safeguarding Officer almost by default because, when we re-started the Youth Club about 20 years ago, I was happy to administer the four or five CRB checks that needed to be done every five years – no big deal. Now, making sure that everyone who needs a DBS check has one; ensuring we go through a ‘safer recruiting’ process involving forms and references and an interview whenever someone new volunteers; making sure everyone who needs to undertake safeguarding training has done so; ensuring consent forms and risk assessments are done; and keeping up with all the policies and procedures that the Diocese and Church of England demand of us, ensuring the PCC has passed the requisite resolutions, has become quite a significant task. Now I say all that, not to evoke your sympathy (well, not much – although if you’re sitting there thinking that all sounds right up my street, then do get in touch afterwards!), but partly to reassure you that we do take this very seriously and have the requisite policies and procedures in place. And partly to acknowledge that all this form filling and procedural stuff does have a positive impact on culture. It makes all of us who are directly involved in safeguarding – around 50% of church members – aware and alert to the issues.

But what the safeguarding training I’ve just completed has borne in on me is that this is not just a paperwork exercise, essential and helpful as that is. One of the tasks we were set as part of the training was to watch the two BBC documentaries about Bishop Peter Ball that were televised at the start of this year – you may have seen them. They make for distressing viewing. Peter Ball was a serial sexual predator who used his almost mesmerizing personality, and his position of power in the Church, to groom and abuse young men. When this first came to light in the early 1990s, when one victim bravely spoke out, the Church and the Establishment closed ranks behind Peter Ball, in effect portraying him as the victim of a malicious smear campaign by one young man who was therefore the perpetrator. In effect their love of neighbour was towards the perpetrator, and they didn’t

believe and even reviled the victim. And they did nothing to investigate whether there were other cases related to Peter Ball or others in the Church, which might mean that the Church was not a 'safe space' after all. Reputation of the institution was far too important – or so they thought.

Many of those involved in the Church hierarchy would have preached sermons on the Good Samaritan and love of neighbour, but when faced with a real victim they didn't so much pass by, as get the whole story up-side-down.

How could they be so blind? Well, one of the leaders of the Church who was involved was the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time George Carey. And he does not come off well in the documentaries. But that brought it all a little closer to home for me, because George Carey was the vicar at St Nicholas Church in the Market Place in Durham in the late 1970s, the Church where Alison and I met. Indeed I have a particular reason for being grateful to George because when Alison and I were going out, and Alison was having a bit of a wobble about our relationship, he told her what a Good Thing I was! Now how could he be such an excellent judge of character in one case (clearly!), and such an awful judge of character when faced with Bishop Peter Ball? And part of the answer was that Ball was terribly, indeed terrifyingly, believable. George Carey was by no means the only one to be taken in by him.

But what, of course, the documentaries also focused in on was the effect on the victims, of which there were many down the years. And it made me realise how damaging, how life-changing, indeed in one case life-ending, such abuse can be. Abuse comes in many forms – sexual, as here, physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, domestic, through neglect as well as through action. It can be difficult to detect, difficult for the victim to come forward. But we should not underestimate the impact it has, and will in all likelihood continue to have on their lives.

So we all need to be aware and alert, and willing to raise concerns where we have them. This is what love of neighbour, particularly where the neighbour is a victim, means. But at the same time, we need to have love for the perpetrators, difficult as that may be – they are our neighbours too, even if love for them might actually involve reporting on them. And we need to be aware that there can be malicious accusations, made against innocent parties. Can we discern that if it happens? And we want to create a safe road to Jericho, a safe space and a culture and atmosphere in all our Church activities where everyone can flourish, and none feels or is unsafe. And all of that without becoming so bent on 'surveillance', spying on our neighbours, that the atmosphere becomes impossible.

Love of neighbour demands that we manage to accommodate all of this, in order to maintain a safe and loving space where all can flourish. But, as we've seen, it isn't completely straightforward. Which is why Paul's prayer for the Philippians, our memory verse for today that you've probably forgotten by now, is so appropriate. I'm going to change it from 'your' and 'you' to 'our' and 'us', to make it our prayer for us and each other. Please repeat after me:

That our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best.

Amen