

Sermon Matthew 22 34-40 for Baptism St Swithun's 25 October 20

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's gospel on love seems particularly fitting as we prepare to celebrate the baptism of Paula, Andrew, Troy and Kyla. Jesus tells his listeners - and us - that love is at the very centre of what it means to follow him. We are to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. The two 'great' commandments are like one another, Jesus says: to love our neighbour *is* to love God.

What's distinctive, though, about this love of Christ? Who are we to love, and how are we to show it and recognise when it is present? It can sound like a painless remedy for all the world's ills - 'just show love' and all will become well. Yet in practice, Jesus' commandment to love our neighbour could hardly be more challenging or costly. To love those close to us - husband, wife, partner, parent, child, grandchild - is often far from straightforward or easy. And Jesus' call isn't just to love those close to us, it's to love indiscriminately. When a lawyer asks him 'Who is my neighbour', Jesus responds with a detailed illustration: the parable of the Good Samaritan. We are to show love and mercy to whoever is in need, whether they're friend, stranger or enemy.

To help others, whether or not we think they deserve our trust; to care for those who are hard to love as well as easy to love; to listen and empathise when we're exhausted; to do what we think is right at times when we're in a minority and risk criticism or ridicule - who can actually live like this in practice? We're bound to fail all the time. We need to remember, though that if we cannot love like this, we *ourselves* are loved completely and unconditionally by God, however much we falter and fall short.

Neither is it easy to work out how exactly we are to demonstrate this love in our everyday lives; in the myriad situations in which we find ourselves, each bringing unique challenges. What does it mean to love our neighbour in this time of Covid? Should we prioritise keeping people safe from the virus above all other considerations? Where then, if we do so, is the love of God visible to a bereaved mother, partner or child, already shattered by grief at the death of their loved one, and then denied attending the funeral because they have, or may have the virus? (Recent Government guidelines have made this subject

particularly contentious.) Where are mercy and compassion to be discerned for the hospital patient, prohibited from having visits for 'safety' reasons; or the care home resident with dementia, denied a hug from their family since March? These are agonising situations, and the least we can do for the sake of love is acknowledge the cost of whatever choices are made, rather than deceiving ourselves that they are moral 'solutions' of some sort. Covid is a reality affecting all of us; elsewhere, in the particular circumstances of our own lives, we attempt to navigate what loving looks like in practice.

Trying to live in love doesn't banish feelings of fear, anxiety or negativity. It's more like a decision of the mind and heart - a desire to choose love, to say 'yes' to God. God doesn't promise us a life free from pain and suffering, but the God whom we seek, as Paula, Andrew, Troy and Kyla do today through baptism, is always with us, his love accompanying us both in joy and in sorrow, whether we always perceive it or not.

God, then, relates to us in complete love, a love that is unconditionally poured out on each and every one of us. In baptism we respond to the invitation of the God who already knows us completely and who understands what we need before we ask. Though he doesn't compel anything from us, God yearns for us to know Him, because our deepest fulfilment lies responding to that love. Today, through their baptism, we celebrate Paula, Andrew, Troy and Kyla's welcome into God's family. We give thanks for each of them and ask for God's help, protection and blessing. 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another' Jesus tells his disciples shortly before his death. 'If there is this love among you, then everyone will know you are my disciples.' Nothing could be more challenging; nothing more deeply reflects our calling. Amen.