

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Sunday 22nd March 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As I introduced a few Sunday's ago, in the weeks leading up to Easter, we're journeying with Jesus towards Jerusalem. We started at that point in the story where Luke says Jesus '...resolutely set out...' (Luke 9:51), He set His face towards the purpose He had come to fulfil. There is a great deal of material contained within the journeying phase of Luke's gospel; Jesus does not enter Jerusalem until halfway through of chapter 19. So, we're going to focus on three encounters Jesus had with Samaritan people, because that was really unexpected of Jesus.

As we heard two Sunday's ago, the Samaritans were Jews who intermarried with their Assyrian conquerors, people of non-Jewish nationality, and that brought about a mixed race who became known as the Samaritans. They were viewed as “half breeds” and “renegades” by the more “purebred” and loyal Jewish people, and in turn the Samaritans developed a hatred for the Jews.

In our passage tonight, we read of the Good Samaritan – it's a story many of us have heard before, it's a story children will still hear in school for Religious and Moral Education, because it's a timeless story, teaching truths that now-a-days we hold as self-evident, a simple outworking of “the golden rule” – to treat others as you wish to be treated.

So, as I said on Sunday, we probably feel like we know what the parable means: we've to be a good neighbour; we've to look out for people who need our help; we've to love other people. And that's certainly one important thing to take away because part of what Jesus showed us in His life and teaching was the importance of loving others as we love ourselves.

So, once again hear the call to sign up and offer your time in the coming months. Sadly, we won't get out all our Easter cards now due to the lockdown – but it was fantastic that over 50% were given since Sunday afternoon. And I wonder, have you called anyone yet? Anyone outside your family? I'm sure we were all busy calling our mums and our grans on Sunday, and then we were back in to work on Monday, even if it was from home –

so, we might have forgotten that part of the message. But in our changing times, a telephone call is really going to make a big difference to people. So, let's be the best neighbours we can during this time, and the more of us who join in, the more care and support there will be in our local community.

As I explained on Sunday morning, when I was thinking about the story of the Good Samaritan this week I was drawn to the other characters in the parable, particularly the priest and the Levite, those two who simply walked on past the man needing help. Now, we must remember that they walked past an individual who was part of their tribe; a people who were a persecuted people, so you'd normally stand up for one another, you'd normally be there for one another.

Instead they simply walk past and Jesus doesn't really give us a reason, yet as you know, I've been wondering if they did it because of fear. Maybe fear of doing the wrong thing, maybe it was fear of the robbers coming back.

You see, they may have feared doing the wrong thing because God's Word said that touching a dead body would make an individual unclean, it would create a disconnect between God and the person who became unclean. But even then, that's just an excuse, because God's Word, as we heard again tonight, says we are to "love your neighbour as yourself". By failing to do that, the priest and the Levite are already unclean; by failing to do that, they are going to have to go through the steps to become pure again, to be right with God once more. They placed a higher value on something other than loving neighbour, and all for naught.

Jesus listeners' would have expected the priest and the Levite to be the good guys in the story, but we see that they embody two things. Firstly, fear and maybe secondly, weariness.

On Sunday, we explored part of the issue around fear, and now tonight, we've seen another: that fear of becoming impure by touching a dead body. Were they letting fear motivate them to do the wrong thing? Because it's easy to give in to fear, especially when it's not to our benefit to do otherwise. So, the priest and Levite embody fear.

But secondly, do they embody weariness? Remember, these are people who are seeking to maintain spiritual purity at all costs, and if they were relying on their own strength to do this, then that's a weary job –

the Pharisees had come up with hundreds of rules on how to know if you were breaking God's Law or not, and you'd have to be constantly checking yourself to maintain that level of purity. They must have been so weary.

Maybe, these two individuals not only feared the robbers returning or of doing the wrong thing, maybe they were simply weary – weary of trying to keep hitting the mark, and so seeing this individual, was just too much for them, it was a step too far, a cry for help they couldn't answer.

Are we feeling fear just now? Are we feeling weary just now? Because fear and weariness can cause us to be poor neighbours. We've seen how fear has motivated stock piling - and we might not yet be feeling it, but to love our neighbours well is going to be draining, it might weary us, if all we're doing is relying on our own strength.

So, what's the antidote? Well, let's go back to the start of the story, as I said on Sunday. Jesus tells the parable because He is asked a question, and in that conversation, we hear that we've to love God with all that we are – with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – and we are to love our neighbour. **Jesus is saying that** these are the two most important things, but He is also saying they're connected.

Because as we love God – as we pursue a relationship with God, then we learn of His love for us, and then His love begins to change us. For God has promised to help us, to give us strength and wisdom and grace - if we will seek Him. **That verse from 1st John chapter 4** has stuck with me so powerfully over the years, that “...perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18) The antidote to fear is to know God's perfect love and we get to know God's love by spending time with Him.

So, what about weariness? Because, you know, to love is really hard work. Take those words from 1st Corinthians that we delight in hearing at weddings: ‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.’ (1 Cor. 13:4-7) Love is hard work; even in the normal rhythm of life, never mind amidst a pandemic.

The man who wrote those words about love, was no stranger to it. He was called the Apostle Paul and he went around starting new churches, helping people understand about Jesus and come to worship Jesus. It was hard work, Paul speaks about how hard it was...

in one of his other letters, he says: ‘Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move...I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.’ (2 Cor. 11:23-27)

Paul went through all of that because of love – love for God and for his fellow human being, as he’ll say time and time again in his own writings. So, how did Paul keep on loving? Well, he also said that ‘...God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit...’ (Romans 5:5)...

It was God's Spirit that gave Paul a heart of love and helped him to keep on loving.

Maybe it's for this reason that Paul writes **to the Ephesians: 'For this reason I kneel before the Father...I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your **hearts through faith**. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.'** (Ephesians 3:14-19)

Paul prays for the Ephesians to have the help of God's Spirit to give them power to grasp the love of God...

I wonder, do we ever pray that? Do we even realise what Paul is saying here? His claim is that we cannot know God's love by ourselves, or at least we cannot know the fullest measure of it without the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. So, if we want to have hearts full of God's love, then we also need God's Spirit, and we receive the help of God's Spirit through prayer.

That might be new idea for us, we might have assumed up till now that we can simply know God's love by our own efforts. **But even Jesus needed** the help of the Spirit, because the affirmation of the Father was as much communicated by the Spirit, in the form of the dove alighting on Jesus, as it was by the words of the Father from heaven. If Jesus needed the Spirit, so do we.

Once again, then, let me ask you: will you invest some time in your relationship with God during these coming months of isolation? And specifically, will you pray and ask for God's Spirit to be given to you and to us all? For it is by Him, the Spirit of God, that we gain power to grasp something more of the fullness of God's love for us and for this world, and through that same Spirit we can then have hearts full of the love of God, full enough to fend off weariness in loving neighbour, and fend off the fear we may feel in these difficult times.

Jesus knows all about fear and all about weariness – in the Garden of Gethsemane He feared what was coming, He feared dying on the Cross. But He did not let fear stop Him, He did not let fear make Him a poor neighbour – instead, for love of you and me, for love of His Father,

Jesus carried on towards Jerusalem to secure for us a living hope.

And often Jesus would become tired, weary enough that He took Himself off to a solitary place where He could spend some time with His heavenly Father and become refreshed in His love to continue that journey He and the Father had agreed upon from eternity past.

For me, that's part of what makes the story of Martha and Mary so interesting. It comes right after a story which is about doing stuff and helping people, about sacrificing ourselves and going the extra mile. The Samaritan paid enough money for two weeks of care at that inn, and those of us in self-isolation, can begin to appreciate something of how long two weeks can be.

But right next to that story, is another story where Jesus seems to say the opposite thing. Martha is busy serving, she's busy being the good neighbour, and in fact she is so busy, and feeling so isolated, that she is at her wits end; she is weary, weary enough to lash out at Jesus. I mean, come on, if there's anyone you don't lash out at, surely it's Jesus.

But Martha is run dry, she's run ragged, she's weary. Jesus, I think, sees that weariness, it's maybe part of the reason why His response is so gentle: "Martha, Martha." There's genuine emotional concern in His voice. He doesn't give her a lecture about losing her temper, or even the importance of better organisation and delegation to others. For love is patient, love is kind, and Jesus is love incarnate.

Yet, Jesus doesn't leave Martha there, He doesn't gloss over it completely, as we might be tempted to do, because true love nurtures, it brings life. Jesus knows that Martha has become distracted by many things, by doing things for others, doing things for Jesus, and all of this has taken the place of simply being with Jesus, of sitting at His feet, as Mary does.

Mary adopts the position of a learner, a student, what the Jews called in their time, a disciple, and a disciple learnt by spending time with their teacher, their rabbi.

Luke reminds us in these two stories, that we are called to a radical love, a love which crosses divisions and boundaries, and sacrifices for others. But love for neighbour is only half of the life we are called to, there is also love for God, and in loving Him knowing His love for us.

The man who asked Jesus the question at the start of the story had forgotten this; he imagined that eternal life was wrapped up and secured in what we do. But as Jesus reminds us **in His own words: ‘this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.’ (John 17:3)**

The expert in the law had forgotten this, Martha had maybe become distracted from this by the many things, but Mary knew, she remembered, so she spent time at the feet of Jesus and in that place, she found life, she found love, a perfect love, which filled her heart.

****Friends, in these difficult times**, God is with us. He knows our fears, He knows our frailty, that we are but dust. Yet He calls us to keep loving our neighbours well...**

and through loving Him to know His perfect love, a perfect love which can drive out all fear and restore the weariness of our hearts.

I pray that God will give us power by His Spirit, to know His love, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and for us to know this personally in our lives and so be able to show it others.

May it be so. Amen.