

Luke 10: 25-28 - Sermon for 10.30am

As we begin to embrace 2018 we all shared in the Methodist Covenant service last week, and then this week we will visit again the primary purpose of our faith – to love God with everything we've got and love our neighbours. It sounds so simple, but in a new year, maybe it's a good chance to revisit it and perform our own personal MOT on whether our gaze might have slipped a bit over the last year, whether our priorities may have altered, and whether we've become a little bit numb to the love that is given, shared, and dare I say it, "required" in these verses.

In October, during our services, we read the version of this story that Matthew's gospel records in chapter 22, and at the 8am service that day I talked about the simplicity of this command and how foundational it is to our identity as Christians. Then I asked the congregation to take some time out to imagine what life might look like if we took it seriously. That might be a process you wish to do this time when you go home, either for the first time or for the 20th time: to imagine what life would look like if tomorrow morning, when you got up, God was the love of your heart; to imagine what life would look like if tomorrow afternoon, God was the true shelter of your soul; to imagine what it would look like if tomorrow evening, you tried to grasp God with all your strength; and then tomorrow night what it would look like to go to bed with God as the focus of your mind. What might it look like if we really did love our neighbours as ourselves...

But today, we move on a little. We are at an important time as a Church family. Over the next few months, there will be challenges, changes and new things which we will have to grasp and grapple with. At the outset, we need to hear again God's commands to love him and to love each other. Our passage today does something the Matthew passage doesn't quite do – it moves us beyond contemplation into action – and that's where we are in a limited way too as a church at St John's. We are about to move from a point where since I arrived we have been getting to know Jesus more and more in all our readings, hopefully in some of the preaching, and in all our communion moments where we have met with God in the bread and the wine. But now is the time when the rubber meets the road in a new way.

It's not that we've not been doing things before. Even just over Christmas there were so many amazing events which were geared at celebrating the gift of Jesus to us as a baby, and which enabled us to spend time together as an extended church family, getting to know each other more, and laughing together. These things are priceless and I don't want you to hear anything against that, but as a church we are about to take some huge steps. We are starting a new service in February, considering our budgets and how we spend them missionally, thinking about how we can learn about Jesus together more effectively and trying to engage more dynamically with our community. All this is good. All of it is risky. And all of it will involve us re-committing ourselves to loving God afresh; and also loving each other, and those of our community too, just as we love ourselves. It is exceptionally timely then that we look at Luke 10 this morning since it's focus isn't just on the Great Commandment as it's called, but also on actually putting it into practice – something that is so easily forgotten. If we can grasp just a fraction of what all this means and then practice it, we have an amazing future ahead of us as a village – a future where God is worshipped and honoured and people are loved, from the neediest to the most affluent and from the young to the old.

So, we begin with a lawyer setting out to test Jesus and our picture of this man is one which we might recognise in others or even in ourselves – someone who knows the answers in theory and loves a bit of checking the small print; someone for whom the theory must be right before it can be

put to use and therefore the action never quite happens. The kind of person who reads books on how to paint rather than actually paints. The kind of person who watches you tube clips on the right way to wash a car, but whose car is always dirty. The kind of person who never prays because they are too busy reading books about how to pray to make sure that when they do actually get around to praying, they do it well – but it never happens. The kind of person who is always on the lookout for an innovative way of reading their bible and therefore never actually makes the time to do it. The kind of person who is so excited about ways of telling people about Jesus that they are always interested in the possibilities and never actually talk to anyone about Jesus. The kind of person who is so interested in raising the profile of charitable causes but never actually gives themselves to support one.

I find myself in some of these. For this lawyer, the challenge wasn't knowing the right answer, but what he did with it. It is Jesus' final words which are the barb in an otherwise benign conversation – "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." Knowing the right stuff is just not enough. Being able to recite, like the lawyer, the core, core things of our faith is good, but remains a million miles from what Jesus is looking for.

This is a terrifying prospect for priests like me – I can give loads of good biblical answers. I can reframe questions in theological terms. I can sound really pious and holy when I need to. I've been trained well, just like the lawyer. But this isn't what Jesus wants from me. He wants my unbounded love and commitment to God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind. He doesn't want my time spent on technicalities and empty ritual or pointless theological debate; he wants my love – for God and for my neighbour.

It's really scary for me, but hopefully uncomfortable for all of us actually. God wants us to practice what we preach. He wants our undivided love. He wants us to seek him first, to prioritise our time with God above all other things in life. He wants our prayer not to be squeezed out but to replace our TV viewing, or our internet browsing if necessary. He wants us to fill our minds with more of God, to exercise our muscles in his service, to be shot through with God into the very depths of our souls and to long for him with all our heart. That is so far removed from turning up on a Sunday and agreeing to the words of a creed.

And loving our neighbour as ourselves is for some of us easier and for some harder than loving God. It can be tough loving God in our doubts or when we feel like he isn't listening or in difficult circumstances. But it is perhaps even tougher to love people we don't like or don't agree with as if they were as important as me and as if they were as in need of my care as me. As I shower in the morning, shave and brush my teeth; do I care for the appearance of the elderly person across the road from me in quite the same way? As I watch the news and take my side on Brexit, do I love the people who disagree with me enough to not bad-mouth them, ridicule them and call them names? Do I make space for others when I don't feel like it? What parts of my life do I hold sacred away from other people – is it my money that I won't use to help those in need? Is it my time that I won't "waste" listening to the lonely? Is it my love that is kept for my family alone? Is it my very self that I won't be made vulnerable by sharing myself with others?

We may sit here this morning with all the right answers, or we may sit here with only some and a whole load of doubts, or we may even sit here thinking this whole faith thing is a bit suspect; but whatever we think about the theory, the task is to love with all that we have and all that we are. To love God, despite our worries and doubts, and despite it feeling forced and artificial at times; and to love all of God's precious creations as if they were ourselves.

I said we were at a rather scary and exciting point in the life of our church and our village. Times of change are difficult. We are all children of routine and stability really even if it varies to the degree. It is now, more than ever, that we need to hear again the call to love God, to love his mission, to love his Church, and to love his people. The immediate story after our reading is the Good Samaritan where we are reminded that loving God's people is loving everyone, not just our immediate family or even our church family. It will be I'm sure that over the next few months this is a challenge as we find ourselves making space in our Sunday routines for people we don't even know yet who don't currently come to church. As we find ourselves believing some decisions are good and other are bad. As we find ourselves wishing the church's resources were used in different ways. It is a massive challenge to love each other.

I don't say all that to manipulate anyone. I want to know when people aren't happy with PCC decisions or even when they are happy! I want to be able to apologise when I get it wrong, or explain when it's uncomfortable. This is all part of loving each other as ourselves. Loving God is seeking to put him first and his priorities first at all times, and as a PCC we hope we do that. We won't always get it right but we do try.

So in the coming months, please pray for me, for the PCC, and for all of us here; and also for the village. Pray that together we all might be able to love God with all of ourselves and love each other actively, with grace and forgiveness, no matter how hard that is.

In the words of Jesus, "If we do all that, we will live". Amen.