

Look left, look right, look around you – who is my neighbour?

Luke 10:25-29

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

26 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?'

27 He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"[a]; and, "Love your neighbour as yourself."'[b]'

28 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'

30 In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

36 'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'

37 The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'

Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'

If you watch Newsnight or listen to a phone-in on Radio Five Live you'll probably hear some predictable debates on predictable subjects.

- What should our attitude to immigration be?
- Is austerity the way forward?
- Should we legalise assisted suicide?
- Should we legalise drugs?
- What is hypnobirth?
- What's the definition of a Facebook friend?
- Does Beyonce or Mariah Carey spend their money more foolishly?

- Is the Voice a better programme than the X Factor?
- Has Richard Dawkins disproved the existence of God?

In Jesus' day, 2,000 years ago in Palestine, they had debates about various things too and one of their old chestnuts was, "How do I get to heaven", "How do I inherit eternal life?"

And just like the questions we debate today, the answer you gave told everyone something about you.

So when the religious lawyers (the closest equivalent today would be the Moslem clerical police who administer sharia law in some Moslem countries) get together over a pint this is the sort of question they would chew over and one they would throw at new teachers to test them out.

They don't like the celebrity status being afforded to Jesus so out comes this debating point. *We do that with emerging celebrities don't we? We try to catch them out saying something inappropriate or politically incorrect.*

At times when He is asked this sort of question Jesus answers with an acceptable formula – something politically correct. But this time he turns the tables, as he does at other times, by asking the question back. And when the lawyer gives the acceptable answer Jesus says, "You got it" and puts the lawyer in his place. It feels slightly patronising.

Jesus is unusual in focussing his disciples onto such a sharp moral code – love of God and love of the other. There is little about bravery, or sacrifice, or leadership, or generosity, or asceticism. Nothing of Churchill's fighting on the beaches or Cameron's hard-working families.

Just love - verse 27- love of God and love of the neighbour (as yourself).

By the way, Jesus assumes that we love ourselves. To love ourselves is the default state for most of us: to protect ourselves, to keep ourselves fed, watered, sheltered and rested.

To love oneself is not a command, it's an assumed behaviour. The command is to love other people in the same way as you love yourself.

The lawyer however is not happy at being shut up so neatly so he has a more pointed follow-up. He sort-of jumps over the implications of the golden rule and skips straight to debating point no. 2. This was another big debating point/test question amongst the legal bods of the time. Who is my neighbour?

The word neighbour in the bible has a number of meanings and they are only partly to do with geography. We tend to think of the people living next door as neighbours.

But they would also have understood the “neighbour” as someone else with whom they had some sort of connection – sometimes it was used of family or friends as well as people nearby.

Today we would probably add people we know “virtually”, FB friends, or people at work.

There was one group of people who weren't considered neighbours by most Jews although they had been continually challenged on this by the Old Testament prophets. This was quite a large group. It was anyone who wasn't a Jew!

So when Jesus goes on to pick at the thread of this question and tells the story of the Good Samaritan he is extending the definition of neighbour way outside their relatively narrow definitions. He makes the answers to these two questions tough ones, tough to understand and tough to live by.

Jesus says that first of all we love God with everything that is in us. Then He assumes we love ourselves but instructs us to love other people in the same way – to seek to care for and provide for others – maybe people very unlike and “far away” from us.

Rather than identifying a specific neighbour and trying to be nice to them, we could probably do that, **Jesus says that the posture of our lives is to love everyone else.**

In the story Jesus tells He sets up the person in need as the Jew's enemy.

So “love your neighbour” becomes “love your enemy”. It moves from a small upgrade in good behaviour to someone who is nearby and probably not unlike us – to a permanent posture of love to those who are very different – not like us at all and perhaps even our enemy.

You may be tested in this with someone in your geographical neighbourhood, at the school gate, at work, even in your extended family, even, dare I say it, in the church.

This church is not a closed community of people – the people not here are not the unloved, neither are they the target of mission – they are our neighbours and we are called to love them as we love ourselves.

This may test your attitudes deeply: your attitude to the asylum seeker or the street drinker or the city banker – as well as the person who lives on our street or in our block of flats.

- This is why the UK's current posture towards immigrants and asylum seekers is not just shaming but is also flying in the face of Jesus' command.

Let me put that to one side – I'll leave you to think about that and consider your posture in life – your thinking and what you say and what you do – does it demonstrate as much love for those neighbours who are not close, for those who are not like you – as the love you have for yourself?

Who is my neighbour?

Let us turn our thoughts to our geographical neighbours in the traditional sense.

I want Leeds Vineyard to be great neighbours to our community in Headingley. But that is something slightly different. I also want each of us to be great neighbours where we live.

Our neighbours may be close by in geographical terms but they may well be a long way away in other terms. I have neighbours who:

- Are committed to other religions;
- Are much wealthier than I am;
- Much poorer than I am;
- Very different moral codes, ethics, politics;
- Different age and stage;
- Work at different hours of the day/night.

But they are still my neighbours.

5 years ago, Ben embarrassed me. He is my associate and I didn't realise that an associate pastor can show up the senior pastor. I'm not into hierarchy but still ...

Whilst preaching he asked us to complete a little questionnaire about our neighbours and I realised I had failed. I preach "love your neighbour" but I hardly knew the names of my own neighbours. The people I live a few feet away from. I had all sorts of excuses: I'm too busy, they're too busy, the hedges are too high, they won't be interested, they're cross cos of all the cars that park outside our house, they think I'm weird, I don't want them to see the state of my DIY, I don't like them anyway

But we decided to put this right. Over the last few years Alison and I have organised an annual street party – the Big Lunch – in our neighbourhood and have managed to invite most of the neighbours into our home over that time. For many it was the first time they had stepped inside a neighbour's house. It's taken time but we have now become friends with many of them and are often doing things together as a neighbourhood.

Yesterday, as I often do before work, I took a quick stroll round my neighbourhood to get some exercise and to pray for my neighbours. I realised that I was able to pray by

name for over a dozen of them and to pray about specific things in several cases – Phil & Amanda with a new baby, Anthony just out of hospital, Ian with business pressures etc.

We have had a few meaningful discussions about Jesus but with no visible result. I am not very good at inviting people to church and no one has come yet – in fact I've had several firm rebuffs. But I do know who my neighbours are and Alison and I are now able to "love our neighbour" in various ways. Indeed they have reciprocated by looking after us too.

It has taken years to get to this point and there is a long way to go. But it started with a nudge and a small challenge from Ben. A nudge which I want to give you (for some of you ... again!).

Your neighbours

Think about the 6-8 people who live closest to you.

1. How many names do you know?
2. What do you know about them which is generally observable? (They've got two kids, she works nights, they drive a hybrid).
3. What do you know about them which you would only discover through conversation?

Pray and ask the Lord:

1. Which one He would like you to invite to church;
2. To which one can you demonstrate love, do an act of kindness?

Why don't you share the result with a friend and hold each other accountable to what you think the Lord has nudged you to do?

Jesus calls us to love others as we love ourselves – some are far away and very different from us, some are deeply unloveable. Nevertheless, allow Him to guide you, soften your heart and strengthen you to walk across the driveway or corridor and say, "Hullo, how can I help you?" And even, one day, "Would you like to come to church, to our Carol service, to our Easter service, to our Alpha launch party...?"

It doesn't matter how they respond, what matters is that you responded to Jesus' command and reached out to them. What happens next is up to Him.

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