

**Sunday 29 October 2023**  
**Last Sunday After Trinity**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18**

**NT: 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8**

**Gp: Matthew 22: 34-end**

In preparing for this sermon, I've been reflecting a lot on love. What is love? What does it mean to be loved and to love? I've been thinking about the different things I love; music and running. I combined these two yesterday by going to a parkrun at Croxteth Park. On my running playlist I had an old favourite of mine: Frankie Goes to Hollywood, a well-known Liverpool group extremely popular in the 1980s. Of course, I was only a baby in the 80s but my mum and dad had the Frankie Goes to Hollywood album. A particular song stuck in my mind as I was running, and I felt I needed to share some of the lyrics with you:

*The power of love*

*A force from above*

*Cleaning my soul*

*Flame on, burn desire*

*Love with tongues of fire*

*Purge the soul*

*Make love your goal*

Make love your goal, that's the message that Jesus is clearly expressing today in our Gospel reading.

This passage comes towards the end of Matthew as the conflict between the scribes and the Pharisees reaches its crisis. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is both orthodox and a profound threat to the religious establishment. His purpose is not 'to abolish but to fulfil' the law and the prophets. The scribes and Pharisees are now desperate, and they publicly confront Jesus in order to discredit him. The question of the greatest commandment follows questions concerning the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar, as we heard last week in Fr Steven's sermon. As in previous disputes, Jesus confounds the scribes and Pharisees with his exemplary biblical knowledge and irrefutable logic.

When Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest, he quotes Judaism's widely recited biblical passage, the Shema, 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus doesn't just leave it at that he adds another scripture, 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18).

These two passages from scripture provide a summary of Jesus' mission and ministry. In quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to align one's entire life towards God. However, one cannot love God without loving what God loves! A person cannot love God and oppress or exclude any of God's creatures, even an enemy. However, within the Church of England those who

are in a position of authority and love God do exclude God's people, the LGBTQI community. In the Church of England, we still haven't reached a point where a same sex couple can marry in a church. I am hoping this will change during my lifetime as a Priest, but I'm not actually sure as the progress is extremely slow and feels as if it has stopped. Back to the scribes and Pharisees, they used the law to place limits on those they were obliged to recognise as their neighbours, Jesus joined these two passages of scripture together in order to smash all the limits and boundaries of neighbourliness. **There are no limits to who is our neighbour.**

As Jesus pointed out in his Sermon on the Mount, 'God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matthew 5:45). Therefore, a person who truly loves God will also love their enemies. It is the only way. To love God is to love in the way that God loves, indiscriminately. To love God is to love what God loves, everything. Jesus proves himself to be the true and faithful interpreter of Scripture, silencing his critics with knowledge and wisdom. This does not end, but deepens the crisis, driving it beyond debate and unwavering toward violence. In the end, Jesus is the Messiah who loves his enemies, who loves as God loves and who loves as 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23).

Where are *our* boundaries when it comes to love? 'Love your neighbour as yourself' has a very clear in-built boundary: loving others parallels how we love ourselves. Sometimes, though, it's the self-love that needs work. On a social media feed this week, a picture popped up with the words:

*'And if I asked you to name all the things that you love, how long would it take to name yourself?'*  
It's a good question.

Jesus modelled how this self-love could look like. He regularly took himself away from the crowds, and his followers, to spend time with God, to recharge and replenish. As we love our neighbours, how do we ensure that we are also loving ourselves? What we are asked to do is simple enough: it is to love. We are not asked to try to understand or solve every situation but simply to take the loving option – that is a lifelong solution and certainly not a quick fix. True love is costly and demanding. It involves the whole of our being.

When we listen to the news, it is difficult to think about love, when there is clearly so much conflict and hatred in the world. The current conflicts in Ukraine and the Gaza strip are horrific and the killing of innocent people including children is abhorrent. We cannot understand it. To quote another song from Frankie Goes to Hollywood in the opening lyrics of War, Holly Johnson sings:

*Oh no  
There's got to be a better way*

There has got to be a better way. A world without destruction, a world without conflict, death, poverty, greed etc. In this suffering world, we are called to see Jesus in all humanity. We all suffer in different ways. I've suffered this year in experiencing the death of my mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Many of you may have experienced such losses. Many of you may be experiencing relationship difficulties or endings, debt, financial worries, and the list of suffering sadly goes on. Within all

creation, God's desire is for us to work together using our unique gifts and talents on God's kingdom work. But when we define neighbour as those who look like us, think like us, or act by our expectations we work against the Gospel message of offering love, justice, and mercy to all made in the image of God. The Good News is that even in a life of struggle and suffering, we have hope and a future. The Good News of Jesus offers us a new song, an alternative way to frame the many griefs and losses we will experience in our lifetime. As followers of Jesus, we can be intentional in creating a different world where love for our neighbour exists and prevails over pettiness, power, and hate. We can be intentional in creating a world where love- the radical and transformative love Jesus talks about- can make room for the 'stranger', a world where all humanity is respected, valued, and affirmed.

What makes these commandments hard to live out in our lives, is that they require us to more fully and above everything else, to put God and love of neighbour at the centre of who we are. This isn't always an easy thing to do because it requires us to love the people around us even when it is most challenging to do so. Even in my personal season of grief, I am still called to offer the love of Jesus to those that I minister to, and I'm glad and privileged to do this. Even when the rug is pulled from under us, we are invited to cling to God. As we struggle with disruptions in our lives, we don't have to remain as we are. Jesus' mission and ministry are about transforming us, not just personally, but He came to transform our communities to be oases of freedom and justice. In a generation groaning under the weight of immense suffering, what are we going to do, what part will we play in transforming God's world and offering a new song, a song of peace, hope and love in this age.

In the words of Holly Johnson: make love your goal.

**Mthr Jennifer Brady**