

Closing the gap

This morning we have had the joy of baptising a little boy, Farrell, and so welcoming him into the community of faith, the family of God. At a time like this our thoughts might well turn to this little boy's life that has begun, the world he has been brought into, the years that hopefully lie ahead of him, and we might find ourselves wondering what advice we might like to give to him, what words of wisdom we might offer him even though he cannot yet understand them. Well, maybe in future days Besong and Fritz might tell Farrell that on the day he was baptised in a church in Amsterdam the passage that was preached on contained timeless advice for how life should be lived: 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

As we have heard, these words were spoken by Jesus in response to a question asked him by the Pharisees, a religious group who were opposed to him and trying to catch him out. And it follows straight on from another attempt by enemies of Jesus to derail him. Last time the question put to Jesus concerned the controversial subject of taxes, and Jesus had to use all his ingenuity to avoid being trapped – as we saw last week. Now he is on safer ground. He is asked which commandment in the law is the greatest and the answer Jesus gives is uncontroversial – essentially 'love God for all your worth and love your neighbour as yourself.' There was nothing particularly original in this: combining as it does a verse from the Book of Deuteronomy with a verse from Leviticus it was likely a fairly common summary of the 613 laws that God had given to this people. I suspect that some Pharisees had heard that Jesus was a heretic and blasphemer and were setting the bar fairly low for him to establish his orthodoxy, as he does.

And yes, it is good and succinct advice about how life should be lived. At the heart of the Jewish Law, after all, were the 10 commandments which are divided between those which have a God reference: loving God, not taking God's name in vain, not making idols etc.; and those that have a human referent: honouring parents, not murdering or committing adultery or stealing etc. And as we were thinking earlier, Christians might note that there is something cross-shaped about the commandments – there are some that point vertically towards God, and there are some that point horizontally, towards our neighbour. And the great Scottish preacher George MacLeod of the Iona Community used to warn of what he called 'dismembering' the cross – of separating these two dimensions, detaching one from the other. It is all too easily for a gap to open up between loving God and loving the neighbour.

So in the Old Testament the great prophets frequently denounce what they perceive to be a pernicious distortion of true devotion to God, where all the religious practices and rituals and festivals were observed but meanwhile injustice was given free reign: in other words apparent devotion to God but coupled with scant concern for social justice. So we have the great 8th century BC prophet Amos speaking for God in decrying the religious practices of his day:

'I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings
I will not accept them...
Take away from me the noise of your songs...
but let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

And those words are echoed by other prophets for whom displays of religious devotion to God are not just empty and hollow without the horizontal dimension of social justice and care for the neighbour – they stink in God's nostrils.

Indeed this is where Jesus may have been being rather more controversial in his reply to the Pharisees than appears – maybe he was having a go at them. Because, you see, what angered the Pharisees about the way Jesus behaved was the company that he kept, the 'sinners' who he hung out with. These were the religious failures, the drop-outs who the Pharisees looked down their nose on

for their failure to keep God's Law. In other words, the Pharisees' devotion to God and to God's Law led to the alienation and marginalisation of many – and the gap between loving God and loving the neighbour yawned wide open.

That gap, or course, has been all too common in the history of the church, and in the unspeakable things that have been done in the name of our faith: whether it's the Inquisition, or the persecution and systematic murder of the Jews, or the justification of slavery from the Bible, or apartheid, or countless other crimes of Christianity where supposed love of God has gone hand in hand with the oppression and suppression of our brothers and sisters who might just have counted as our neighbours. Indeed that is the accusation of many atheists who point to the record of religion generally in promoting hatred and murder throughout the world. Too often the love of God has been a pretext for murder, whether it's the Crusades or whether it's 9/11 or the bombing of the Manchester Arena in the UK 3 years ago or the beheading of a French teacher a few days ago in Paris. Again and again religion has created and exacerbated a gap between God and the neighbour.

Well, of course many of those same atheists would deal with the gap by simply abolishing one side: getting rid of God altogether. Dispose of God and we can finally learn to love each other. Ditch God and we shall all live in neighbourliness and peace. Well, believe that if you will. Believe it in the face of our increasingly secularized world which shows no sign whatsoever of becoming any more neighbourly and any less brutal – far from it.

One point, however, that needs to be made here is that Christianity has something unique to contribute to narrowing that gap - which makes it all the more tragic that we have so often failed at this. You see, the Christian faith is founded on the idea that in Jesus Christ God has become our neighbour. The Christian faith rests on the belief that God was in Christ – uniquely and fully. What we call the Incarnation, God assuming our flesh and blood means that God comes alongside us and becomes our neighbour. In Christ the cross is formed as the vertical and the horizontal come together and meet, and as the divine becomes human, the gap is closed. And Jesus himself, of course, pointed to the poor and the hungry and naked and the imprisoned said that in reaching out to them and tending to them we were reaching out to him - but we must go further and say that in reaching out to him there we are reaching out to God. It's not, however, only in the poor and the hungry and the naked that we meet God. In the Incarnation, in God becoming human, human flesh becomes a sacrament: our flesh and blood and bone become a meeting place with God. And the quality of our faith, the authenticity of our faith, is therefore tried and tested in the way we treat our fellow human being.

That brings us, lastly, to our reading from the Letter of John: 'Those who say, I love God, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen'. There is no denying the force of this argument. How can you say that you love God who is invisible, while you fail to love your brothers and sisters who are staring you in the face? I would want, however, to push this argument of John's further. You see, something that we see in the Gospels is a widening, an expanding, of what is meant by the neighbour. So for the Jew of Jesus' day, the phrase 'love your neighbour', referred to your fellow Jews. That's as far as neighbourliness went: your nation. But Jesus opened that up, pushing that boundary. In Jesus' ministry it is clear that the neighbour extends to the Gentile, the non-Jew. In fact it goes even further – for Jesus tells us to love not just our neighbour but our enemy – here the boundaries extend to those who we might have cause to hate. The story of the Good Samaritan, especially, is a story about pushing the boundaries of neighbourliness into territory we resist.

Well, let's return to John's argument about loving the visible as well as the invisible. What if we were to rephrase John's statements as, 'those who do not love Creation whom they have seen, cannot love the Creator whom they have not seen.' Rephrasing John that way widens the horizon of the neighbour to all created things, all that God has made – all who are neighbours because we are all part of God's visible, tangible creation. In this way animals become our neighbours with whom we are called to share this planet. But so does all of nature in its astounding creatureliness. The whole creation becomes our neighbourhood, and all created things our neighbours. Francis of Assisi

was pushing in this direction not only in his reverence for animals, but also when he spoke of brother son and sister moon and mother earth: these created things, in fact, are not just neighbours, they are family! And given our current ecological crisis perhaps we need to give these biblical passages this twist, pushing even further the question, 'who is my neighbour?'

Jesus summarised the law with these two commandments: love God, love your neighbour as yourself. When we have a God who has become our neighbour we cannot separate these commandments – they hang together, cross-shaped. But Jesus would always push us to expand the circle of neighbours: beyond those of our tribe to the poor and the destitute; and beyond them to our enemies; and beyond them all our fellow flesh and blood human beings; and beyond that to all our fellow creatures; and beyond them to all creation with whom we share a divine Creator. The gap between love of God and neighbour must close – and the boundaries of neighbourliness widen to embrace all creation. Then, at last, God will be all in all. Amen.