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Love your neighbour

In the final book of the Old Testament, close to the New Testament, we find the words of the Prophet Micah. In the book of Micah at chapter 6 at verse 8 we are told:

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

To be a Christian means that we believe in Jesus Christ and so that is what the word “CHRISTian” means. So any Christian needs to see what Jesus Christ says.

This picture is a painting by Nicolaes Roosendael, in circa 1664, of The Good Samaritan trying to heal the traveller.



It was an article called “No, you should not love your neighbour ‘as you love yourself’” by the Rev. Oliver Harrison that made me think about this. The Reverend Oliver Harrison is the Vicar of Holy Trinity, Wilnecote, just outside Tamworth in Staffordshire.

When our Lord Jesus Christ was asked about the commandment to Love your neighbour he responded by telling the story of The Good Samaritan.

In a Church service we often hear the words taken from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 22:

Jesus tells us

³⁷ “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’

Throughout all of this the word for love is the koine Greek word “agape” which is caring love. It is love in which we care for the other person. There is no other connotation here.

Strangely the second commandment is often misquoted and the misquote links back to the commandment to us to “....to walk humbly with your God.”

Firstly, let us read the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the story of the Good Samaritan to understand who our neighbour is. We find the story in the Gospel according to St Luke at chapter 10.

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ²⁶ He [Jesus] said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' ²⁷ He [the lawyer] answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' ²⁸ And he [Jesus] said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he [the Lawyer] asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'

³⁰ Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.'

³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii [coins/money], gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' ³⁷ He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Priest and Levites always could go to somebody's aid in their distress on the Sabbath so in the story they are all caricatures, and we all know people who would walk on the other side of the road rather than get involved. In this story "Samaritans" were understood by the crowd as "mere foreigners", as "lesser people", so the crowd of listeners would not have expected our Lord Jesus Christ to raise up a "mere foreigner" as the Hero who did the more Christian thing than the Priest or Levite.

In the Christian view we are all created equal and we care for others and welcome others including strangers and foreigners. Christians do, however, expect people to become better (to constantly change for the better). We are not perfect people and do not always get everything right. That is what makes Christianity so accessible to everyone because it offers forgiveness for getting things wrong. In fact it offers anyone forgiveness no matter who they are.

Please notice that in the Church service the words of the second great commandment are: "Love your neighbour as yourself." and the same words are used by the lawyer questioning our Lord Jesus Christ in the story of the Good Samaritan: "and your neighbour as yourself."

Yet people often misquote this as if what was said was *“Love your neighbour as you love yourself.”*

... but it doesn't say that. What it says is *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”*

The difference might seem small, but it isn't really. The misquote indicates we should love ourselves, and we should, but this is not heightened self-love at all. That heightened self-love is where the mistake comes in. The love we should have is one in which we care for others at the same time as serving those all around us just as our Lord Jesus Christ *did not come to be served, but to serve.*

In Matthew's Gospel at chapter 20 we read at verse 25:

²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your servant - ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

In Matthew's gospel at chapter 18 we read:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’

² He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³ And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

We are asked to be like a child and to be the servant of others so we are NOT expected to “lord it over them” (i.e. anyone). Other people are not “lesser people” as we discover in the story of the Good Samaritan. Every one of us is created in the image of God, every one of us is as special in God's eyes as the next person because we are all God's creation. We are all asked to be changed over time into Christ's likeness and we are all expected to change.

...which brings us back to the the book of Micah at chapter 6 at verse 8 in which we are told:

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

So let us “walk humbly with our God.”

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