



THE BENEFICE OF COXLEY WITH GODNEY, HENTON & WOOKEY

# Love your God, love your neighbour

## LOVE IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

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The world, in some ways, is not the same as it was last week. Yes, the world is still turning and the sun still shining, but our lives have ground to a halt. With the government advising everyone to stay at home and to only travel if absolutely necessary our world has been reduced to the four walls of our homes (and our garden if we have one!). So how do these restrictions affect how we understand our passage from Mark's gospel today? What does it mean to love your neighbour in the time of Coronavirus, when our daily lives are restricted in so many ways? Well to answer that we first need to look at what it means to 'love the Lord your God.'

## YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD

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'You shall love the Lord your God', this is most often read as a present command but what exactly does it mean? Is it a feeling we should have? Or is it something more than that? One view is that love of God should be, as Jewish philosopher Maimonides writes, 'like a person who is "lovesick," whose thoughts cannot turn from his love for a particular woman. He is preoccupied with her at all times...Even more intense should the love of God be in the hearts of those who love him'. But our connection to God, our perceived closeness to him often waxes and wanes. Is it realistic for our understanding of loving God to be entirely emotional, dependent on our feelings at a particular time? Let us explore the rest of the passage to see if it can shed any light on what love of God should look like.

Firstly, our passage says to love God with all our heart, this is not calling for us to be all emotional about God like we might if we said we loved our family with our whole heart, but in fact, in the Hebrew world the heart was associated more with your mind and thoughts than your emotions. If our thoughts are after God at all times, then it is only natural that our thoughts turn to God's love for us and for all creation. And this is the deeper meaning of love in the Hebrew, it goes beyond emotions and also refers to loving actions. This explains how God can command people to love him, it is not in the sense of a warm fuzzy feeling, but he instructed them to act in love to him, to be faithful to him. This is emphasised when Jesus says to love God with all our soul, because soul is not just synonymous with heart like 'my heart & soul' but in the Hebrew it is related to a person's life, every moment throughout your life. To love God with our lives is for God to be our priority and that following his ways are our priority, even when they put us at odds with the rest of the world. And so, from this exposition of what it means to love God, we see that loving others is not just a mental exercise but involves action - it involves showing them God's love. Love is both inward and outward.

## LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR

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So, in this time of coronavirus, what does it mean to love your neighbour both outwardly and inwardly? Well let me suggest three specific ways:

### By Serving Others

As we have seen, loving our neighbour includes action, an outward gesture; and so, one of the things that we can do is physically helps others. Already there have been those in need of practical help, both in our churches and in our wider communities. Galatians 6.10 reminds us to 'do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.' The church was created for times such as these, it is in these moments that sacrificial neighbourly love, so often ignored or belittled by wider society, comes into its own. So, in setting up WhatsApp groups, becoming members of Facebook groups, or signing up to the NHS Good Samaritan scheme, is a way that we, as the church, can offer practical support to those isolated. If you, or anyone you know in our parishes, are in need of any assistance during this time, for the collection of food or medical supplies, or even just a conversation over the phone to help reduce the loneliness that comes from isolation then please do be in touch with either myself ([curate@chwchurches.co.uk](mailto:curate@chwchurches.co.uk)) or one of your church wardens, we will be happy to help in any way we can. However, although this may be the most obvious display of neighbourly love, this is not the only way to show it.

### By Staying Home

Jesus was always subverting cultural norms and expectations: a king born in a stable, a king entering the city on a donkey, and most of all a saviour king who saves all by dying. The passage we read today even subverts normal practice - in a time where it seemed like there were more religious rules to follow than people to follow them Jesus reduces them down to just two - love your God and love your neighbour. Sometimes the best way to love your neighbour is to not do what you might expect - that is instead of physically helping them, caring for them in their home etc. we should do nothing for them. Staying at home and not seeing them, particularly if they and you are vulnerable to the virus, might be the best way to love them - it is reducing the risk. This is also why our church buildings are closed, not because we do not love our congregations and wish we could be with them, but because it is the most loving thing to do right now to protect everyone. It may seem inconvenient, but when has love ever been convenient? Love more often than not draws us out of comfort and into the unknown and so we must put up with any inconvenience out of love for our most vulnerable. Others may say that to close the church buildings is to lack faith in God's protection, but we all have been blessed by God with intellect and reasoning and so heeding the advice of scientists and medical experts is trusting in God's protection, the protection he has provided for us through others.

Nevertheless, even if you cannot help others in the usual physical ways we can still help in other ways. We can help through prayer. This is a time where many of us have been made to feel helpless or disempowered, however it does remind us that ultimately, we are all dependent on God, for life, for redemption, for salvation. So, let us turn this disempowerment into power once more, harnessing the power of prayer, seeking God's intervention, drawing strength and power from him who could never be helpless. This is a great time to become prayer warriors, those who fight for God's kingdom from their armchairs, bringing anything and everything before God. In the Old Testament, in 2 Chronicles 20 we read of King Jehoshaphat praying to God, acknowledging God's power over all things. He does this when confronted by a vast army that outnumbers them and God provides them with the victory. Remember the words that God said to his people that day: 'Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's.'

### By Speaking Hope

And that leads me nicely onto my final suggestion of outward love you can show those in your church and village communities: by speaking hope. Our reading says: 'You shall love the Lord your God.' Now this is usually thought to be a present command, but it is also a future hope. When we stand before God at the heavenly banquet and see what Christ has achieved for us, we really will love the Lord our God with all our hearts; we will have no difficulty in worshipping God for eternity. (Revelation 4.6b-11; Revelation 7.15-17) This is the hope we have as Christians. We have the best news to share. In the face of anxiety and fear of death, we can offer hope. We can share the good news of a Father who loves and cares for us, of his Son who came to die so that we might live, and of a Spirit who makes us whole and new. We can share the good news of a life beyond death, one where 'death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' You may think it morbid to speak about death at this time, but it is a fact that we cannot avoid - this virus kills. However, you are not speaking about death you are in fact speaking about life - the hope of eternal life! As more people become sick, as more that we know and love start to be admitted into hospital or suffer at home, is there any action more loving than to reassure people of the love God has for all people, a love that means that 'death is swallowed up in victory', that it has lost its 'sting' (1 Cor. 15.54-57), and that we have nothing to fear for eternal life awaits us? I don't think so.

However you decide to practise loving your neighbour, be it through serving others, staying home, or speaking hope, may God bless you, may he bless this time we have, and may he protect you from all harm. Amen.