

Who is my neighbour?

A Matter of the heart

Luke 10, John 8:37, Ephesians 2:10, Zechariah

It is a great honour that you should invite me to offer you some reflections on the scriptures concerning the topic of who is my neighbour – and my thanks to the Dean and all involved in this invitation. When I was first approached, I was down in Glenstal Abbey and a wonderful Catholic priest that evening, quite coincidentally, and unsolicited was regaling me with the depth of scholarship of members of this community. So I feel a little like I am bringing a cup of sand to the beach.

This is a wonderful topic to be tackling and reminds me of that piece in Thomas Merton prayer where he talks about the difficulty of following God's Will and says "but I believe the desire to please you, does in fact please You" – and this choice of topic seems to me full of the aroma of the desire to please him.

Our Experience

The invitation also graciously suggested that we might have some insight and experience from our outreach into the D8 community. But let us be clear about our limitations in this regard.

A young couple early in our establishment in Saint Catherine's recognised that the combination of poverty and addiction meant the young children in the area had a broken family environment which complicated care and education. They started an after-school homework club for a number of evenings and then ran a high energy fun-filled session on Saturdays called kids club – following the pattern of a similar ministry in New York founded by Bill Wilson. Many church members helped in this. A young solicitor who was part of the church joined the team and took over the leadership, expanding it into rugby for the teenagers, engagement with young offenders in prison through to a social enterprise - teaching skills such as woodwork and bike repairs.

This has now become a wonderful and significant charity called Solas Project which is separate from the church and receives funding from many sources.

Many of the leaders and participants came to faith, or had their faith reinvigorated in the church, so to the extent that this all flowed from the church, and that we created an environment in which God could stir these people to reach out in this way – then it can be said to have played an important role.

But apart from that which continues to flourish, the church, whilst it continues to connect with many local community groups, has many congregation members who travel in from the area and we too must wrestle with how to be a neighbour.

Who is my Neighbour?

But let us turn to the question, who is my neighbour? And given that Jesus was asked this exact question, it seems good to look at his answer which is given in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10.

This seems to me to raise two profound challenges for us.

The questioner, Luke tells us, was asking the question – because he wanted to justify himself.

He wanted his security to be in the knowledge that he was doing the right things..... so that he earned or justified his position with God and did not have to depend on his relationship with God, and what God had done for him so the first challenge is to what extent the answer to this question will give security to us in our doing rather than in our being with him.

This flows into the second challenge which comes from Jesus' answer to the question.

As so often, Jesus spins the question on its head, and looks at the hearts of those who should be candidates to consider the beaten man as a neighbour. Why are the priest and Levite (who passed by on the other side) so full of fear, they cannot extend love to their neighbour?

Could it be as Jesus suggest to the Jews in John chapter 8 verse 37 that the reason they are so against him is because they won't make room for his word in their lives – the Greek word Chorei – χωρεῖ - make room for, make space for, make accommodation for.

So I think that's the second challenge for us, how we make space for his word in our lives so that we can see our neighbour and act from love, not fear.

Jesus says apart from me, you can do nothing. John 15:5 - so could it be that the answer to the question can only be found in the daily abiding with him? That still small voice that says here is your neighbour – when you have nearly got back to your car, and a lady from your church community, wants help with the bags all the way back to the church or two drug addicts on a wet night need a sandwich and you are late for your church meeting, or a work colleague is trying to process a loss or a business problem – where the still small voice wants his light to shine at times that are convenient and inconvenient.

So that the answer then to the question is an ever-changing one, and depends on us having our head on his chest to hear the answer afresh.

Jesus wants the answer to the question to flow out of who we are becoming – how our likeness to him is growing. He moves the focus of the question back to us. Just like with our own children, He is more interested in who we are becoming than what we are doing. And just like with our own children that does not mean that he is not interested at all in what we are doing– because the story ends with “Go and do likewise”.

Heart and mind.

But all this touchy-feely stuff can feel very uncomfortable. I am a product of an upper middle-class stiff upper lip England (graciously grafted into the Irish culture, courtesy of my wife), shaped by the rationalistic post enlightenment culture that puts the mind at the centre of the person and success at the centre of values.

So to love the Lord, my God, with all my mind is something I am perfectly at ease with.

But that is not the emphasis God places – love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul... These come first.

Here is an emotional God who constantly prioritises the heart.... “Guard your heart... David was a man after his own heart... Trust in the Lord, with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.”

My call is to become like him.....to love him, with all my heart, strength, soul, and mind...so that the more I look into his face – the more I will recognise it when I turn to look at my neighbour and see God’s image in him.

And so now I am a results-oriented workaholic in some degree of recovery, finding peace and joy in the doing flowing from the being.

And indeed, the reality is that we are made in God’s image, and so this means that we reflect his emotional nature.

And so, the first commandment flows into the second commandment and the last verse of the epistle reading for today reminds us that God is going ahead of us preparing the ground.

The Epistle reading is the letter of Paul to the Ephesians in chapter 2 and ends at the 10th verse which says this:-

“We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Ephesians 2:10

He has good works prepared in advance for us both individually as he promises and corporately as he sends leadership, vision, and call.

How to start?

So how does one start? I think so often the things of God start in small ways.

Who has despised the day of small beginnings? Men will rejoice
Zechariah 4:10

Solas Project began with one or two people and a few children. People with heart, vision and call who put their hand to what lay in front of them. As they took those first few steps down the path other needs and opportunities became apparent to them from their engagement in the community.....and then others came to help, inspired by the vision of what they were doing.

The other thing that I think is helpful is to leave space for and be gracious to mistakes – things that don't work. They are often the ways we learn.

He has gone ahead of us and the question is what has he put in your hands, and which way is he leading?

I wish a blessing on you all as you seek to bless those around you both here and in your day-to-day lives.

Let me finish with a thank you. Every church, like every child, needs a place to be born.

Dean John Paterson – Dean of this Cathedral from 1989 – 2004 - gave us as a church congregation – a room at the Inn – a place to be born – in allowing us to start our meetings in St. Werburgh's. And I wanted to acknowledge my gratitude for his – and by extension your - kindness in so doing, it was a critical part of our journey.

May the Lord bless the work of your hands.

Amen