

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

If there's one part of the bible we know it's this bit. Even if we know only a tiny bit about Jesus we know that he talked about love. The phrase 'love thy neighbour' is part of our general lexicon – even the title of a 1970s sitcom!

And one parable that is still widely known is the Good Samaritan told by Jesus to illustrate the scope of this command to love.

So, we're not hearing anything new this morning in our bible readings - from the OT to the NT its clear what's being said – Love God, body, mind and soul, and love your neighbour as yourself.

So the more interesting question today is I think HOW - how are we to fulfil this commandment to love? How can we love? We know we are commanded to do so, but how?

Also let's face it - commanding love is not possible anyway. I could command you to love me until I am blue in the face, but love doesn't work like that.

And given how easy it is to talk in platitudes about love, and wax lyrical about the power of love in church, it's easy to let it all just wash over us and nod along rather unaffected...

How do we interpret this commandment to love as real people in a real world...

It might be helpful to begin by thinking about the word love.

Perhaps the word is part of the problem because in English we think of love as a feeling (an abstract noun). But in the bible the main words we translate into English as love are mostly not about feelings but actions – about what is done, what is given.

And this begins in the Hebrew Scriptures with God. A key word often used to describe the very nature of God – Chesed - is untranslatable into English – 'love' isn't up to the job and sometimes translators use 'lovingkindness' instead to try to convey a kind of more verb-like quality. The point is that God's love isn't a feeling, it's an action, something given, something shared – God's Word *goes out* as life-giver, freedom-bringer, God is merciful, just, compassionate – these are the very attributes and nature of God. Love is a verb.

One theologian even replaces the word God with 'For Being' to capture the untranslatable sense that God's 'love' is this self-giving action to give life and save life.

Our word love is too abstract, too amorphous to capture this.

So in the NT when St Paul writes about the love of God as revealed, shared, given, poured out in Christ, he elects to use a Greek word which captures this sense of being active on behalf of the other, sacrificially giving. Most English translations simply use the word love for his carefully chosen word Agape but in doing so they dilute it of its biblical roots, its distinctive action-based character.

Only the KJV attempts to honour this – and so for example in Paul's famous hymn to love, so popular at weddings, the KJV translates love as charity. 'And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three, and the greatest of these is charity.'

Personally, I find this helpful, because I can at least know if I am being charitable in my judgements, in my compassion, in the use of my money, gifts and time. I can decide to be charitable in a way that I can't decide to love. (Word of caution here – this is not the same as simply giving to a charity which could be done for uncharitable reasons, but more about deliberately orientating ourselves to serve others, to put others first, which of course can include supporting charities, but goes much deeper and wider in our choices about mutuality and respect.)

In this way love becomes a decision, an act of the will rather than the heart. Rather like at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan which Jesus tells in reply to the Lawyer's question about who his neighbour is, the parable finishes with these words, 'Go and DO likewise.' Love is a verb.

Finally, as we wrestle with this question of how to love we gaze on Jesus with the Pharisees in our Gospel reading. He has entered the city (we've had Palm Sunday) where he will die, where the extent of God's for-
otherness, this love in action, will be revealed on the cross, in a garden, in resurrection life. Here in Jesus is the one obedient life who fulfils the commandment to love, opening the way for us.

'This is love', wrote St John, 'not that we loved God, but that he first loved us.'

It is one of the paradoxes of faith that our actions and choices do not make God love us more – this love is pure gift – but that OUR actions and choices can make us love God more, that when we choose to serve one another we grow in our hearts and souls. In feeding the hungry, seeking out the lost, and welcoming the stranger, we encounter the Christ. And when we encounter the Christ, we encounter love.

How do we love God and neighbour? Perhaps we are simply to get on with acting charitably in our judgements and choices, and to trust that our willing hands will enlarge our hard hearts, and that we will grow in love of God and neighbour in a kind of virtuous circle.

In a world which has run out of answers, and is tearing itself apart, we know that love is answer, but the big question is HOW.

Perhaps in the words of Nike, we are to JUST DO IT.

Love is a verb.

Thanks be to God. Amen.