

What an appropriate text we get to today in our text from Romans, considering it is Father's Day. In particular, that great verse that sums up all of the practical commandments: **"Love your neighbour as yourself"**, springs to mind. Whenever it is a birthday, an anniversary, a special day, Mother's Day or Father's Day or another personal celebration we all have some little inkling of wanting to be made to feel special in some way. It doesn't have to be over the top, just there, our moment of being special. It's natural. Jesus, as the apostle Paul picks up on here, sums up so many of the commandments with challenging us to think of how we can make others feel loved, special and appreciated, cared for, just as we would like to be cared for. Love your neighbour as yourself. Two questions immediately spring to mind: who is my neighbour and what does this love of self, look like in its ideal form?

The answer to who is my neighbour was of course answered so clearly by Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. The challenge to love our neighbour includes everyone, even, as we noted from Matthew 5:43-48 last week, our enemies. As we observed, to only love those who love us is barely a challenge. The Good Samaritan parable and Jesus' injunction to love challenges us to go and do love in a very real and practical sense. Here it is qualified, as we would love ourselves. What does this mean?

In the Scriptures the ideal is the target whilst the reality of the human condition is recognised. When we want to discuss how to love oneself, we have to acknowledge that here are some very sick or disadvantaged people out there who really don't know what this is, so we might want to recognise carefully what this love of self means here. We also want to distance our thinking from the heresy that we have to love ourselves perfectly before we can anything for God, this is never the case in the Scriptures. We learn to love by doing love. Throughout the New Testament particularly, the focus on loving action as a sign of true faith was an almost radical new thing.

Consider the following passages from various key figures in the New Testament: Firstly, in John 13:34, Jesus says, **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."** In 1 Corinthians 16:14 the apostle Paul instructs the Corinthians: **Do everything in love.** The apostle Peter, in 1 Peter 4:8 commands, **"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."** And the apostle John says, in 1 John 3:11, **"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another."** And in 1 John 3:18, **"Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."** If we are to apply this to ourselves, then self-loving is at heart practical. Therefore, all of our actions, motivations, deeds can be examined as to how loving they are. "Doing" in love is a deeply personal act that reflects our faith. It looks outward for the best for others.

When we love ourselves it is essentially practical. We do what is good for our bodies, recognising our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the vessel through which God does His work in the world. We keep as fit as possible, we eat and exercise properly, to the best of our ability so that we can be available and useful for the Lord. We also discipline our minds, what we think about, how we think about people, what we watch and listen to, what we feed our brains, what we say and we feed and exercise our brains with knowledge and wisdom. Why? Again, this is a tool God has given us for our work in the world. We learn to manage our emotions in good times and bad and we avoid those things and substances that will damage us and impair our bodies and minds. We also rest, remembering God's intent for the Sabbath was not for God but for us. We are the one's who need to rest and recover. We love ourselves to honour what God has given us and so that, like soldiers, we are ready and fit to do our duty, first and foremost, for God.

I've had the sad occasion to meet a number of people who don't seem to love themselves. Some don't take care of themselves. Some hate special days. Almost without exception it seems to be because they have been so bruised by life experiences that they have gone down a negative path. But God wants us to feel special and to look after ourselves. We are His special creation, designed with purpose and love in all the stages of our lives. God loves us and wants us to feel special and He wants us to make others feel special too. This type of loving does no harm to others but indeed the opposite, it challenges us to rise to be a better person and simultaneously to lift others.

We could use here the metaphor of smiling. Did you know smiling is almost infectious? It is so odd at the moment. I love to smile at people, to joke and make them relax and lighten the moment, break the ice. People generally appreciate it, even with my odd sense of humour, puns and appropriately today, "dad jokes". But, in our current setting, it can be quite hard. If some people live behind a mask figuratively, right now, many of us have to do so literally! But have you thought about how, when you smile at a person, they, most of the time smile back, and then they smile at others and it spreads faster than a virus. It's great. God wants our love to be like that. As 1 John 4:19 reminds us **"We love because he first loved us."** God loves us, we know that love and are refreshed by it and we pass it on. We love others as we love ourselves, consciously or unconsciously.

One of the great things about healthy loving as Christians is that it gives us a positive view of the future and an expectation of future good. Even, might I suggest in the setting of death, often the worst human outcome. How might we see this? In loving, we experience something of God's love and provision in our lives. We know the world has been corrupted and everything is not as God intends it to be. We know that the love we experience now is wonderful yet the fulness of God's love for us is beyond imaging, yet, in time, we will experience it alongside our Christian brothers and sisters. Think this sounds foolish then consider this ...

Every year the Jewish Festival of Passover, we heard about this in the reading from Matthew 18, reminds us of the definitive nature of God's love for His people through calamity and future hope. The Christian equivalent is Communion. In the general narrative Passover (or Pesach in Hebrew) recounts the exodus of the Hebrew people from captivity in Egypt. The challenge of Moses to Pharaoh, the plagues, the Red Sea Crossing, the escape have all become the stuff of history and legend and Passover remembers these events annually. In Hebrew practice the seven days before the Passover are a time of reflection and cleansing. Literally, all yeast is removed from the house, even down to the last crumbs which are ritually burnt on the last day before Passover. Yeast was often used symbolically as a symbol for sin. It only takes a little to make a disproportionate difference. For the week, unleavened, yeast-less bread is eaten. Preparation for Passover then was a time to recognise sin and deal with it. In Old Testament times the way to deal with sin was to offer sacrifice at the Tabernacle or later at the Temple. Passover would fore-shadow a time when God would deal with sin forever and in a different way. Now consider this: the Hebrew people in Egypt were suffering badly. They were slaves, their workload was increasing and the local population was treating them with increasing loathing and fear. They were weak and lapse in their faith. There seemed no way out. God however, loves His people and plans for them, even when they fail to call on Him for help.

The event of Passover night saw a lamb slain and its blood placed on the doorframes and lintels of the Hebrew homes. The family was to remain indoors and not go out as death would rain outside. (Doesn't that sound familiar in our world right now.) The sacrificial lamb was eaten by the family. This pivotal event is the Pesach meal on the eve of Passover. Called the 'seider', meaning 'order', it follows a fixed sequence of special foods as the story of the exodus is told and discussed. The recounting is called the Haggadah (meaning 'telling'). The focus is on liberation and the participants are encouraged today to share their own stories of liberation in their own context. The Passover is, like Communion, understood to be a living event in continuity with what happened historically. The key? Remembering what God has done and recognising God's purpose for good into the future across generations. In the formal roles of

the supper a child starts by asking why the night is different from any other. It is the father's role to start the sharing with the words : "we were slaves in Egypt but now we are free." The Passover Supper classically ends with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem!" A forward-looking promise of joy when the Temple will be rebuilt, Jerusalem regained and when God's peace will reign. Every year then the Hebrew people are reminded to look forward with a positive expectation regardless of their circumstance.

As Christians we understand this in the fullness of God's plan and we see it in history. The nation of Israel, destroyed and dispersed throughout the world, was re-established in 1948. Plans for the rebuild of the Jerusalem Temple are far advanced. The world is once again in chaos on multiple fronts and looking for answers. God continues to love all His people, all across the world. Christian fathers are called today, as they were through the history of God's people, to remember what God has done, to encourage their families to both repentance and humility before God and to walk in freedom and hope for the future because God is always faithful to His Word. Children are encouraged to ask "why?" questions. This is good.

We might also note the fullness of the metaphor of the Pascal Lamb. Since there is currently no Temple there can be no sacrifice. However, there is no longer any need for sacrifice because Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice. He has paid for our sin once and for all. When the Temple is rebuilt He will return to it and there will be no need for sacrifice. This is the joy that we as Christians carry through all of the travails of life: we live in the constant expectation of the good, often unexpected and undeserved, that God will do in and through our lives and those of our families. Even more, we live in the eternal hope of God's ultimate restoration and reconciliation of the world and our place with God in eternity.

We finish then with the words of the apostle Paul in Romans who tells us to love, **"understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So, let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."** We know something of the joy that is coming, that Jesus calls us to as we discipline our walk with Him and learn to love extravagantly. This makes the momentary struggles and difficulties bearable because what is to come is of infinite worth.

Today, as we remember fathers particularly, we praise God for them and for the particular roles God calls fathers to achieve: as lovers, as encouragers, as history keepers and as men of faith, as role models to their families. No, they are not all perfect (that may shock a few of you!), but in individual ways they are awesome. Dads too, like all of us, need to learn and keep learning, how to love and they and we need to keep practicing it. So, praise the Lord for dads. Love them, because the more you do, the more they too will learn to love. It's a process.

So, Happy Father's Day and may you all grow in faith, love and with positive expectations for the future, whatever circumstance you find yourself in. After all, God is in charge, He loves us, He walks with us and He is waiting for us at the end.

Amen