

Coronavirus 2: Love in the time of Covid 19 – Matthew 22: 34-40 - 29th March 2020

Introduction

Some of us may have seen a film entitled - “Love in the time of cholera.” I haven't seen it, I don't know what it's about. And I imagine it's talking about a different type of love. But we could call today's talk “Love in an age of Covid 19”. We're going to ask the question - “What does love of neighbour look like in these days we're living in?” It's a question a number of people have told me they're asking. “How can I love? How can I serve others?” And it's wonderful that God has prompted you to ask that question. Well that's our topic today.

Last Sunday we asked the question “how can Christians have hope at this time?” And we thought about 6 reasons from the Bible to be hopeful – confident, whatever the future may hold. And if you didn't manage to hear that talk then do follow up on Youtube or in the Listen to talks section on the Anlaby Churches website.

We have hope. But as the apostle Paul tells us in a number of places, hope is accompanied by faith and love. (1 Corinthians 13; Colossians 1:3-5). In terms of faith - As a church we're finding ways for our **faith** to be sustained and to grow.

We're meeting together virtually on a Sunday. Those who want to and are able are meeting on a Tuesday via Zoom for Lent meetings. Hopefully we're reading the Bible daily and praying. Perhaps we're reading other Christian books or looking at resources online. We're encouraging each other by phone or by whatsapp or by email or whatever. And we're learning to depend on God in a way many of us haven't for years. We have hope; we're growing in faith. And – if at any point you feel you don't have hope or you're not growing in faith – or you're struggling with your mental health – please get on the phone to me or someone in your Life group or a Christian you trust – let's help each other in this.

But what about love? I want to start with Jesus's words – the greatest commandment, which was our second reading. Love for God; love for neighbour.

And I want to focus today on love for neighbour. Not because love for God isn't important – it's vitally important. And actually we love God as we love our neighbour; and we love our neighbour as we love God.

“How can I love my neighbour at a time like this?”

How can I love my neighbour in the time of Covid 19? And of course that question links in with one of our approaches as a church. We're a Christ centred community existing to spread a passion for Jesus Christ across the Anlaby Communities and beyond. And one of the ways in which we seek to do that is by “Sending disciples to bless the Anlaby Communities.” How can I love my neighbour and be a blessing in a time of self-isolation and great fear? Notice that we don't have a choice whether or not to love our neighbour. All of us as Christians are called to love our neighbour at all times. But what that looks like will be different for each of us. And that will depend on a number of things, as we'll see.

Learning from Martin Luther

This week I've been greatly helped by reading a letter written by Martin Luther.

Many of us will be familiar with that name. He lived in the C16th in Germany.

It was through Martin Luther that God kickstarted the Reformation of the church as he nailed

his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. But less known is that Martin Luther lived during one of the many periods of plague experienced over the centuries. Actually lots has been said over the last few weeks about what we can learn for today from Church history - about dealing with plague and all sorts of other things. In terms of dealing with plague – Christians have often stayed to fulfil their duties when others have run; and people have come to faith as a result. I'll put some links on an email to help us think more about that.

Luther received a letter from another pastor in an area dogged by great plague, asking what he should do. So Luther replied with a letter that's been titled "Whether one may flee from a deadly plague." And the title shows their situation was different in some ways. They had the option to flee; we need to stay at home and keep social distance. But there are also similarities as we'll see.

And what I've found is that Luther combines Bible teaching with great wisdom and awareness of the situation. And as I've thought about this, I've come to the conclusion that how we love our neighbour depends on five things: Our temperament, responsibilities, condition, gifting, and Christ's love. We'll work through those, and I'll mention relevant bible verses as we go so you can look them up later if you'd like to.

Know your temperament

First – as you think about how to love your neighbour, know your temperament.

Luther describes two types of people – what we might call the fearful and the bold. Many of us are in the fearful category. We don't want to be infected by Covid 19; we don't want to infect those we love. And that's fine. He doesn't condemn that temperament. Although he does say – we do need to take our responsibilities seriously. We'll come onto that.

Others are bold. Perhaps we are trying to carry on life as normal; perhaps we haven't really thought about the impact the virus might have on us and others.

Perhaps we are completely surrendered to God to do with us as he wishes.

Again, Luther doesn't condemn this temperament, although again we need to consider our responsibilities to others. But as we think about loving our neighbour it's worth pausing to ask – what is your temperament?

Know your responsibilities

Second thing to consider – Know your responsibilities. And we're going to start with something Luther doesn't mention but which is vitally important.

Obey the government

And that is, obeying the government. Paul writes in Romans 13 that everyone must submit themselves to the governing authorities. (Romans 13:1). We thought about this back in January – do look up the talk on the website if you'd like to hear more.

We need to be obeying the government. And we know that the government's directives and advice at this time are for our good and the good of our neighbour:

> Stay indoors – unless it's essential that you leave. For your benefit; for the benefit of your neighbour, so the virus doesn't get spread.

> When you do have to go out, keep a distance of at least 2 metres from others.

> If you develop symptoms, self-isolate.

> Have a good system of personal hygiene.

These are all directives that we need to follow.

Our personal responsibilities

With that in mind, let's come on to what Martin Luther has to say about knowing our responsibilities. He writes: "People should remain in the roles God has given them to fulfil their responsibilities – unless adequate provision has been made otherwise." All of us have roles and responsibilities that we need to fulfil in order to love our neighbour. Some roles are clearly defined:

> Parents have a responsibility to care for their children – however much they might be struggling with education at home! (Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21). That's a big responsibility at the moment – vitally important. And we can help each other with it.

> Children – have a responsibility to obey their parents. (Ephesians 6:1-3)

> Pastors have a responsibility to pastor.

> Adults have a responsibility to care for their elderly parents and relatives (1 Timothy 5:8).

> Public officials – government, hospital staff and so on – have a responsibility to carry out their roles.

> Employers have a responsibility to their staff. As the government has said, keep them on as much as possible, and they'll help with funding if needed. (Colossians 4:1).

What do we do if our responsibility puts us in the way of danger? Luther puts it like this - "If they flee but provide capable substitutes to ensure that the community / family / church is provided for – that is fine." In other words it's not wrong to flee – or to stay away - as long as we've put measures in place to make sure our responsibilities are fulfilled. So to give an example in our current situation – If you are vulnerable to Covid 19 and you have a responsibility to someone which could put you at risk – can you find someone who's less vulnerable to take your place? If so - that's fine, your duty is fulfilled. As Luther writes, "It is commanded that we seek... all that we need and avoid destruction and disaster whenever we can, as long as we do so without failing in our love and duty towards our neighbour."

So – the second thing to know – your responsibilities. Why not take some time today to think through what are your responsibilities, and how you can make sure they're fulfilled by you or someone else?

Know your condition

Third, know your condition. We've touched on this already, but if you're vulnerable, or indeed high-risk, then loving your neighbour will look very different. If you are high risk, please stay at home completely. You can still love your neighbour by phoning them, showing care and compassion, and above all praying for God's mercy and his will to be done in this crisis.

It's also worth mentioning at this point that Luther talks about the evil of hiding the fact you have the disease - and the even greater evil of deliberately circulating the disease. Know your condition.

Know your gifting

Fourth – know your gifting. All of us have different gifts – we talked about this last June when we looked at 1 Cor 12. Some of us have gifts that are particularly valuable at this time. If you're working in an essential job – that is a gift, a gift to society. Work at it with all your heart, as

working for the Lord (Col 3:23). Other gifts that are coming to the fore are gifts in technology; in listening – the ability to sit on the phone for hours – just to mention a couple. If you're not working at the moment, for whatever reason, you have the gift of time.

Why not take some time to ask God what are the skills and gifts – including the gift of time – that God has given you for such a time as this?

Know Christ's love

Finally, know Christ's love. We've talked about temperament, responsibility, condition, gifting. But there's one vital ingredient missing. It's where we started. "Love your neighbour." But love isn't just something you conjure up is it, something you force – it has to come from somewhere, be generated by something. And for the Christian, our love for others springs out of Christ's love for us.

Think of the historical birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ – as we remember at Christmas and Easter. The Son of God could have stayed in heaven with his Father in perfect self-isolation - happy, joyful, lacking nothing, not even needing to go out to the shops to stock up on hand gel or other essential items.

But he didn't. As the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2, he emptied himself, he became nothing. He came to a risky, broken, sin-infected world where he knew he was going to die. He lived a life of perfect love. And then he went willingly, purposefully to the cross – dying with an agony that wasn't just physical but spiritual as he was cut off from his loving heavenly Father, bearing the punishment for our sin. And then he rose again, proving that there is life beyond death for those who follow him. And that there is a principle in the Christian life – death leads to life, as he says elsewhere - "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24).

And so he sends us, as those who have been loved, to love. To love God; and to love our neighbour. And he gives us his Holy Spirit : So we don't love in our own strength, but in the strength he gives us as we depend on him. And as we think more about his love for us – his self-giving for our sakes – facing hell so we receive eternal joy – so we in turn want to love.

And if you're not yet a Christian: This is the heart of the Christian faith: Not what we do for God or our neighbour; but what God has done for us in Jesus. Do keep tuning in; do check out our website. Do ask about an Essentials course – we can still do them online during this period of self-isolation.

Who is our neighbour?

But who is our neighbour? Certainly our next door neighbour; certainly anyone we come into contact with; but doesn't love compel us to go further than that – to think of those, for example in Hull who have lost jobs and are having to visit the foodbanks? To pray for those in Zimbabwe who are facing a catastrophic epidemic with compromised immune systems and a handful of ventilators in the country.

Are they not also our neighbour?

So how can we love our neighbour?

So how can we love our neighbour at this time? The answer will be different for each one of us. It will depend on our temperament; our responsibility to the government; our responsibilities to

others; our condition; our gifting and time available; and our response to Christ's love. We need God's wisdom. This isn't black and white.

If we're not vulnerable as defined by the government (because we're all vulnerable to some extent) then we are allowed to go out if it is to serve those who are vulnerable – that is defined as being an essential activity. We need to be praying for wisdom; we need to be open to promptings from the Lord. Could we be volunteering to help at one of the Foodbanks? Could we be offering to help with delivering food to the high risk through the Parish council scheme or the NHS scheme? I'll be circulating details of things we could be doing in due course.

And all of us – whether we're at risk or not – all of us can still love our neighbour from home. We can phone people. Lots of people are lonely, vulnerable, struggling with mental health issues. Why not call? And I know that is happening lots; and I praise God for it.

Most importantly, we can all pray. What a privilege, to be able to talk to the Lord God who sits above all that is happening, and to ask him to act – knowing that he listens and responds. Prayer is how we show God we're depending on him to work, not our ourselves. We know we are in great need – and only he can do something about it. What can be more important than that?

And I just want to make a suggestion that you can take or leave. Alice and I are planning each Wednesday to pray and to fast for our society, our world, God's work in this crisis. You may not really have thought about fasting before. But it's a Christian discipline that's been around for centuries. It has a bad reputation because we often think of it as trying to twist God's arm or to justify ourselves before God. Actually, it's the opposite. It's a recognition of our complete dependence on God to act. If you have underlying health conditions or if you're under 18 it may not be a good idea to fast. If you want to find out more about fasting I'll send a link round to a sermon. Let's pray at least; and possibly pray and fast each Wednesday for our society, for our world, for our doctors, for our government, for the Lord's work to be done now as always.

Finally, whether vulnerable or not, working or not, we can all be prepared as Peter writes “to give a reason for the hope that we have.” (1 Peter 3:15). People are looking for hope aren't they – in a way they haven't been for years. And we have hope. We have hope that endures even in the face of death. Surely the most loving thing we can do for anyone is to share our Christian hope with them.

Closing thoughts

As we close - a couple of final thoughts.

We will fail.

Of course, we will fail. We will fail to love our neighbour. Only one person has perfectly loved his neighbour as himself, and that is Jesus Christ. So let's daily come back to him, asking for his forgiveness – knowing that his blood on the cross has paid for all our failure, all our doing wrong and failing to do what is right. And asking for his strength – depending on him to give us all we need.

Our days are in God's hands.

Second our days are in God's hands. As Psalm 139 says “all the days ordained for me were

written in your book before one of them came to be.” (Ps 139:16). I could take every precaution possible and still catch the Coronavirus. I could be bold in the extreme and not catch it.

Here's what Luther says:

“From what has been said we derive this guidance: We must pray against every form of evil and guard against it to the best of our ability in order not to act contrary to God, as was previously explained. If it be God’s will that evil come upon us and destroy us, none of our precautions will help us. Everybody must take this to heart: first of all, if he feels bound to remain where death rages in order to serve his neighbor, let him commend himself to God and say, “Lord, I am in thy hands; thou hast kept me here; thy will be done. I am thy lowly creature. Thou canst kill me or preserve me in this pestilence in the same way as if I were in fire, water, drought, or any other danger.” If a man is free, however, and can escape, let him commend himself and say, “Lord God, I am weak and fearful. Therefore I am running away from evil and am doing what I can to protect myself against it. I am nevertheless in thy hands in this danger as in any other which might overtake me. Thy will be done. My flight alone will not succeed of itself because calamity and harm are everywhere.”

And finally, Luther again, talking about how we can fight against the devil's work:

“The second blow against the devil is God’s mighty promise by which he encourages those who minister to the needy. He says in Psalm 41 [1–3], “Blessed is he who considers the poor. The Lord will deliver him in the day of trouble. The Lord will protect him and keep him alive; the Lord will bless him on earth and not give him up to the will of his enemies. The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed. In his illness he will heal all his infirmities.” Are not these glorious and mighty promises of God heaped up upon those who minister to the needy? What should terrorize us or frighten us away from such great and divine comfort? The service we can render to the needy is indeed such a small thing in comparison with God’s promises and rewards that St. Paul says to Timothy, “Godliness is of value in every way, and it holds promise both for the present life and for the life to come” [1 Tim. 4:8].”

Let's pray.