Morningside Sermon 10.30am 25/10/26

Love God, Love Neighbour

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46

The C18th/C19th English poet, essay writer and critic, who helped introduce the literary world to poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth once wrote: "I have been trying all my life to like Scotchmen, and am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair."[i] One Bible Commentator suggests substituting 'Leviticus' for 'Scotchmen' and we might get some idea how Leviticus, the Law Book of the Old Testament, is one of the most neglected books in the Bible. I think for many people the Book of Leviticus has made little dent in the way we, 'teach, preach and study the Bible in the community of faith. Few get beyond the technical Israelite priestly work about rituals and sacrifices, and Leviticus is commonly imagined having little relevance for those who live in an age of grace shaped by the New Testament.

Leviticus is a book about holiness. The holiness of God, and the holiness of the people who try to follow God, and be like God. It has to do with the relationship between God and God's people, and how something of Who God is and what God does rubs off on our hearts and minds, our souls and spirits. God's holiness gets on to and under our skin, affecting not just how we look, but how we behave. It shapes our priorities and our decisions, it shapes our moral and spiritual qualities. In Leviticus, working through it, we see revealed something of the nature and work of God, God's holiness. The same kind of holiness demanded of every believer following Jesus.[ii]

Leviticus, meaning 'relating to Levi', the priestly family of ancient Israel. A book attributed to Moses, but is a collection over centuries, but particularly after the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 586 BC. An attempt to maintain the identity of the Jewish people through recording

rituals and laws. It trys to preserve what it meant to be a faithful person in a community of faithful people.

Just imagine, if all the Bibles and hymnbooks and related music, and churches and cathedrals, and books of theology and philosophy relating to the Christian religion were completely destroyed, but you and a few people like you were left who had been brought up as a Christian, a follower of Jesus, what would you choose to write down, and pass on, and imagine, and create that would help preserve and regrow Christian faith? AI couldn't do it, for it has not heart and soul. But you have.

I Googled 'create a religion', and found a website, How to Create a Religion: a step-by-step guide. "*Creating a new religion involves defining core beliefs, establishing rituals, and organizing structure. Follow this step-by-step guide to develop your faith from scratch, including key philosophies, sacred texts, leadership roles, and marketing strategies for growth."*[iii]

I don't have time for all that malarkey, so I turn to the Bible, and find in the Book of Leviticus, *"You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy…You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord."* Leviticus has more: *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."* If you follow that route, you'll find yourself in good company. It's where Jesus travelled. His reinterpretation of faith, its relationship to God, and its practical outworking, had its genesis in the small print of the Book of Leviticus. If a Church wants a pastoral mission statement it need look no further than Leviticus 19:18. Love our neighbours as ourselves. Who could argue with that? Not only Jesus found this core message, but also the apostle Paul writing to the Galatians. *"For the whole law is fulfilled in the one word (or saying), 'You shall love your neighbour as*

yourself.'" This isn't abstract theory. It is a practical way of living out our faith. Not only believed, but acted upon.

That word, 'neighbour', described a wide range of people ancient Israelites were obligated to care for: the poor; the alien (or stranger/immigrant); the worker; the deaf; the blind; the fellow citizen; the orphan, the widow. 'Neighbour' is not limited to the equal with whom we share a social status. It is also the disadvantaged person shunted to the edges of society, especially those people the community may be tempted to ignore, or abuse, for economic, political, or physical reasons….Here we find the fundamental law of the Old Testament. When God created humans, He made them in His likeness. Every human being bears the likeness of God. If we don't love our neighbours, made in God's image, we don't love God. If we don't love God, we are unlikely to love our neighbours.

Jesus elevated this charge to love one another, to love and not to hate. It is a charge that is fraught with difficulties. It's hard enough to love our family and friends at times, but our enemies? Them too? In our world today, in its shoddy politics, particularly those emanating from corrupt administrations in Washington DC and Moscow, and in the State of Israel, and in the bile of far-right parties in the UK and in Europe, the impulse that appears to drive them is predicated on hatred and fear. As far as the eye can see there is a yearning for violence and revenge, coded as 'justice', against those who do not fit in with a cultural stereotype. In such a climate, the community of faith is hard pressed to know what to make of an ancient Bible command not to, '*take vengeance or to bear a grudge*.' How can any community that yearns for and deserves justice be obedient to the command to love, not hate, (its neighbours and its) enemies? Easy answers will not suffice for vexed and complicated issues.[iv]

The commandment in Leviticus, which Jesus picked up and prefaced with one from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy which commands us to *"…love the Lord your God with all your*

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" , is the centre of faith. It puts our belief system into action. Believing is not a theological abstraction. *"Faith without works is dead."*[v] Our relationships - with God, at home, in the workplace, at Church, between nations and across communities are supposed to be ethical. Loving God and loving our neighbour is central to what it means to be a believing, practising Christian. If, "*The centre cannot hold*", then, "*things fall apart."*[vi]

We are to love God with our whole being. We are to work hard to create a fair, just, harmonious and caring society, showing how personal obligation goes to create the relationships necessary for good community. We are not only to love God ***and*** our neighbour; we are to love God ***through*** our neighbour. Arguing with opponents in the tensions and controversies of Jesus' last days on the Monday of Holy Week and in the Temple, we find a timely reminder of the essentials of discipleship.[vii]

'*How can I sum up what it is that I have been trying to get across these last three years?*', wondered Jesus. A lawyer sparked His imagination, '*What's the greatest commandment in the Law?*' And Jesus found His mind gathering up from the complex web of Old Testament writing two pithy sayings that captured it all. Love God. Love Neighbour.

Have you ever thought about who first wrote down those words quoted by Jesus? Not Moses in full Charlton Heston declamatory style, emblematically given the authorship of the first five books of the Bible. But some wee soul, whose name is long-forgotten, scratching away in some dark recessed room in Babylonian exile; or in a high tower in the rebuilt temple. Furiously trying to remember what was important, what was key, what was essential to what *belief* in God and *action* with God was all about. Writing not for glory or recognition but in order to help and guide and inspire.

To what purpose?

A Church of Scotland day of prayer next Saturday.

The work of Morningside Hope for people with dementia.

Supporting the work of the Edinburgh Clothing Store.

Making poppies for our first Remembrance Sunday display.

Baking to raise funds for the Church.

Singing hymns and introits and anthems.

Learning about saving children from Nazi Germany.

Serving tea and coffee to friends and strangers and neighbours.

Love God. Love Neighbour. From the Old Testament. And from the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth, sent to inspire and heal, bless and save.

You. Today. And your neighbour also.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

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[i] *Charles Lamb, "Jews, Quakers, Scotchmen and Other Imperfect Sympathies", London Magazine, 4, No 20, pps 152-156*
[ii] *R K Harrison, Leviticus, p9*
[iii] *Sarah Huynh, How to create a religion, Website, May 2025*
[iv] *Samuel E Balentine, Leviticus, pp166-167*
[v] *James 2:26*
[vi] *W B Yeats, The Second Coming, in Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats, pps184-187*
[vii] *Leith Fisher, "But I say to you", p288*