

Sermon Easter I

Loving God and our neighbour

Today, the first Sunday after Easter, is also known as Low Sunday. Last week was certainly the heights: the great event of the Christian year, the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead for the means of grace and for the hope of glory. Today we descend a little from those heights and it is time to remind ourselves of some practical Christianity. Here is the whole nub and centre of it:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself

You remember this was Our Lord's answer to the question *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* Put to him by a lawyer. A lawyer asking spiritual questions – who says there are no jokes in the Bible! This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it. But when we think of commandments, we shouldn't think of something stern and legalistic. The only point to God's commandments is that they are for our good. If we keep God's commandments, we shall have eternal life. This does mean what it says, life everlasting. But it also means the life of the aeons. The life which nothing can destroy. The life of quality. The life of supreme good. In the lawyer's Greek words: ζῶην αἰωνίον (*zoen aionion*).

Let's start with the second part of the commandment, the love of our neighbour. And notice, when God gives us opportunities for working out our salvation with fear and trembling, he gives us things close at hand. It is your neighbour you are commanded to love. We're not all called to emulate St Bob Geldof and save Africa. There is too much humanistic prattle about loving all humankind: that Gandhiesque, Tolstoyan abstraction. It is, after all, very easy to love in the abstract, all humankind or even all Africans. It is notoriously difficult to love your neighbour, because you know your neighbour all too well, and all his irritating ways. There is something irresistibly comic about the modern Christian's profession of love for, say, the developing world and all the Fair Trade coffee therein – given the fact that he makes it quite plain that he can't stand the bloke who sits next to him across the aisle every week. And how shall a man love Mozambique which he hath not seen if he loveth not his neighbour whom he hath seen?

And anyhow what is this love that we are commanded to have? It is certainly not the attempt to summon up schmaltzy feelings about people. That's not love. It's sentimentality. And please let me remind you: sentimentality is not a low grade form of love; it is the opposite and enemy of love because it is the prostitution of genuine feeling – what D.H. Lawrence in a rare moment of clarity described as *working up in yourself feelings that you don't really have*.

It's also doubly hard to love our neighbour because we are pedestrian and dull, whereas love requires us to be imaginative. Remember the commandment is to love with all our heart, soul strength and *mind*. To love your neighbour, you must first understand him. You must get to know what he really wants. This means you must become aware of *his* feelings enter his interiority, his soul. I tried to dramatise this once in a novel called *Growing Up With Sex and Death*:

Something loomed in the distance. A great oak tree, damp, implacable. The boy just wanted to look and look at it. To take it in. To understand what it was. To remember it. The oak leaves and the silent river. The great spread of the tree like a kindly godparent:

“Geoffrey,” he said “you were telling me you had a friend once.”

The oak tree receded. There was a weir across the river. Other people were really real. They had centres too...

The first step and the hardest thing is to understand that your neighbour is as real as you are. That’s what loving him as yourself means. It’s what our father Immanuel Kant meant when he said we must never regard other people as means to an end, but as ends in themselves. If you want to discover the Absolute, look no further than your neighbour.

Eternal life means bliss. Now why should loving our neighbour bring us bliss? Easy. Because when your heart goes out to your neighbour, it takes you out of yourself. Damnation is self-preoccupation. Hell is self-centredness. Shakespeare defines it: *Richard loves Richard: that is I am I*. Hell is not God’s punishment. The self-obsessed man locks himself in hell. The keys of hell are on the inside.

I come back to the lawyer’s question: *Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?* There is something sick about it. Sick in Blake’s sense:

*O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*

The lawyer is concerned about his own salvation. *I, I, I...* He shouldn’t have asked Jesus, if that’s what he was worried about. He should have applied for psychotherapy or turned up at some counselling centre. When you think about it, there is something vulgar about being concerned for your own salvation. Something bourgeois. You couldn’t imagine the Duke of Wellington worrying about something like that.

After this skirmish with my neighbour, it’s time to turn our thoughts to God. What can it possibly mean to love God? There is a class of religion-mongers, devotees of what is called *spirituality*, who will tell you more than you want to know about loving God. They will talk about mystical transports, getting to know your true self and your soul’s mystical union with God. I wouldn’t buy a used hymnbook off these people. Mystical union with God is for those divinely possessed weirdoes, the saints. Mystical union with God is OK for St John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, but it ain’t you, babe; and it ain’t me either.

Never mind ecstatic transports which, as Charles Dickens remarked in another context, might have been the result of a half-digested piece of cheese. Our only reasonable way of loving God, who created us, is to obey him. And we can’t even do that. God has given us his commandments solely for our own good – and we can’t keep them. This is the definition of Original Sin: we are so messed up, we can’t even act in our own interests.

One way to love God is to thank him: *for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life.* Unfortunately, thanksgiving is out and complaining is in. I recall G.K. Chesterton's *Autobiography* in which he recounts how, as a little boy, he used to sit around the fireside on a Sunday evening and overhear the adults talking. Someone mentioned gratitude. And, being those sorts of sardonic, self-obsessed metropolitan sophisticates we all know so well, they all with one accord began to accuse him saying there was not much to be grateful for. Whereupon, as Chesterton remembers:

My old grandfather, who was then so old that he hardly ever spoke at all, said suddenly out of his silence, "I should thank God for my creation even if I knew I was a lost soul."

This business about love in the end lays itself out in a lovely simplicity – like the Sanctus in Faure's *Requiem*. God is love. And love is God. God is not love and something else. God is love and nothing else. This means very clearly that wherever you find love, you find God and wherever you find God, you find love. Jesus answered the lawyer's question by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. St Augustine tells the same story:

God is love. And God is the love with which he loves us. And we have our being only because of his love. And, if we love God, it is only by the love of God within us

Go, and do thou likewise.