

Trinity XIII, 8am

Romans 13:8-end

Love your neighbour as yourself: if there's one bit of Christian teaching that has sunk deep into the popular mind, this is it. And indeed, not just Christian teaching: something like this saying, this Golden Rule, crops up in one ethical and spiritual tradition after another. Today in Romans 13, Paul goes so far as to say it is the point of the whole Jewish law. If you can honestly say that you're putting your neighbour first, that you are constantly looking out for and doing what will do him or her good, then you're keeping the point of the Law.

Two quick comments about that. Number one, note what love *isn't*, or at least, isn't *first* according to the Bible. Love is not *first* a feeling. It's not about whether you look at someone and your heart is full of warmth and sympathy and tenderness. As has often been observed, such things can't really be commanded. You can't tell someone to love, if by love you mean only or even primarily an inner *feeling*. People can't help their feelings.

What you can help is what you do, and this is what the Bible is much more interested in. To love your neighbour means that you are constantly looking out for, and doing, what will do him or her good. It's a matter of practical care, *doing* things. Feelings may or may not come along – and indeed experience teaches that with surprising frequency they do. But love is not about feelings. It is about commitment. Paul is saying, be committed, to whatever builds your neighbour up. That's love.

And who is my neighbour? That question was famously asked of Jesus, of course, who in response told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of which was that you cannot draw a line of comfort, which says that people like you are neighbours and strangers are not. Anyone can be your neighbour, even the least expected, and especially those who have been beaten up by life and are lying bleeding in your path. Who is your neighbour? Well, everyone, potentially: but have a look around and see who's hurting, and start there. Begin to look for and do what is going to help. Make your whole life like that, and you'll be doing what the whole Law was about.

If we are honest, we all know that we do not live like that. Yes, most of us do it to *some* extent. Most of us help others out, many of us are even very kind-hearted and practical indeed. But it is a remarkably unusual person of whom we could say that, really, truly, their whole life is like that. That nothing is held back, that it is *all* about looking for and doing what will help their neighbour. That they really are like Jesus: one in whom all there was, was love. Most of us, to one degree or another,

don't live like that. There are bits of us that are all about *us* – our comfort, our needs, our ego and the neighbour doesn't really come into it.

These are what Paul calls the works of darkness. Sometimes they're flagrant and outrageous and everyone would condemn them – even if a bit hypocritically, because the condemners do similar things themselves. Sometimes they are quite respectable, like piling up more and more wealth. Sometimes they're very private, like a grudge or bitterness harboured. Whatever it is, it is to do with ego: to do with energy being poured not into the good of my neighbour, but into what *I* want, now. This is the stuff of which Paul says, let us cast aside the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. For the night is far gone, and the day is near.

Now this, for Paul, is just as important as the 'love your neighbour' bit. As I said before, that is said by many great moral teachers. But *this* isn't – the idea that the night is far gone, and the day is near. Paul thinks that one reason why most of us do not, wholly and entirely, love our neighbours is because we're still stuck in the night-time. The thing about night-time is that it's dark, and you can't see properly. No-one can. Remember, he's talking here not about your physical eyes and eyesight, but about your moral and spiritual sight. And it is, he says, darkened. We've lost sight of what we're called to be, lost sight of what being human is all about. And so it is not surprising that we stumble around in the darkness, looking after ourselves and not loving our neighbour.

But day, says Paul, is coming. Paul thinks that soon, very soon, the world will be flooded with light, and we will all see – very clearly – what we are meant to be and indeed what we are. It's a different way of speaking about what he calls elsewhere the coming of Jesus in glory: one day soon, everyone will see that this world was made to be like Jesus, will understand that we were always called to be the same kind of lover as he was, to be wholly and joyfully given to each other. And we will see, too, with grief, to what extent we did not do it. Whereas now, all around us is night, and it's easy to be confused or lost; then all things will be bright. So come on, Paul says, live *now* as if the day has dawned. It is already beginning. You know these things: so act on them.

And the key act is this: Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is saying, literally, get dressed. Get dressed and ready to face the bright new day. The kind of life that is fit for the new age is the one Jesus lived, the life of love and joy and service. You'll be ready for the kingdom precisely to the extent that you have let the life of Jesus clothe you, cover you – in the words of the prayer of humble access, insofar as you are found in him, and he in you. Be joined with Jesus – through prayer, through communion, through loving like him, and you will be made fit to face the day. That's the reason for being here.

Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

