

King's College Chapel
Sunday 29 October 2023
Love your neighbour

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart....and...thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Matt 22.37, 39)

May I speak in the name of God, Source, Word and Holy Spirit.

I speak in the home of scholars. And many scholars and fathers of the Church have opined on what it means to love your neighbour as yourself, and how this ties up with loving God.

Is it that our neighbour is made in the image of God? Thus, loving our neighbour is loving God, as Evagrius Ponticus suggested? Is our love of God the inspiration and foundation of loving our neighbour: that we imitate what we love, so our love of God inspires us to imitate God's love for all, as Theodoret of Cyrrhus held? Or does loving our neighbour come first, and out of what we know, we learn to love the unknown and unknowable God? (Ailred of Rievaulx.)

Rather than an intellectual discussion of these fine differences on which comes first and why, much as we love intellectual discussions in King's, I plan to explore this topic by telling you a story, or rather three stories, that illustrate loving our neighbour in our world today.

On Sunday, the Provost invited the whole College to a screening of a film entitled *Beyond Utopia*, about North Korea. We heard from North Koreans who had managed to escape to South Korea, where they could speak freely. They spoke of the commitment of their leader, Kim Jong Un, to developing nuclear weapons, and his failure to look after his people. We saw footage of people, young people, lying dead on the streets, where they had died of starvation. Others just walked past.

We heard that Bibles were banned and Kim Jong Un had plundered the story of the birth of Jesus and turned it into his own birth story, and that people were required to pray to him in the mornings and display pictures of him on all their best walls, pictures that would be examined without warning by men entering their homes, wearing white gloves, checking for

dust. If they weren't sufficiently prominently displayed or clean, beatings would follow.

We saw people carrying bags and cartloads of their own excrement, because their leader expected them to deliver it so it could go on the fields. Punishment for not doing this was such that neighbours sometimes stole excrement from others' toilets so as not to get in trouble.

If family members defected, the remaining family was punished either by banishment - deposited in an inhospitable terrain and left, effectively, to die - or sent to a gulag. First, they would be beaten. One man spoke of having been beaten every day for 9 months, before he finally confessed to whatever crime he was accused of, and was sent to a gulag.

A mother, now in South Korea, agonized over her young son, who had left his grandmother to try to find her, and was captured, beaten, and sent to a gulag. She heard reports that the beatings had left him with damage to his lower back, so that walking was hard, and with damage to his chest, so that breathing and eating were difficult. The weapons they use to beat you with, they are designed to break bones, she said. She knew, because she too had been beaten.

While those within North Korea remain unaware that the outside world is not like this, some try to defect to escape these beatings, to escape gulag imprisonment and death.

For these people, Pastor Kim, a Korean missionary, was literally a life-saver. He risks his life time and time again, delivering people to freedom, through China, Vietnam, Laos and into Thailand, and thence to South Korea. He risks capture, death by being shot, death by drowning in a perilous river crossing, death by gulag and yet he does it again and again. His own son died in an accident while he was away rescuing others. I have never known such anguish, he said. But he vowed to go on to liberate as many as he could and at the time the film was being made, that numbered 1,000.

In a country where callous disregard is shown to the people by the leadership, where people struggle simply to survive, to live, good neighbours are in short supply. Pastor Kim can truly be said to love God and love his neighbour as himself.

My second story is the unfolding tragedy in the Middle East, which has been dominating our news for weeks, since the Hamas attacks on Israel took place on 7 October.

We have all learned of the capturing of hostages, of the killing of children and families. Footage from the body cams of militants have been shown to journalists with chilling scenes of mutilation and murder.

And Israel has responded by vowing to wipe out Hamas, and has begun the destruction of Gaza, cutting off food, water, electricity, medicine. According to the World Health Organisation, the average person needs 100 litres of water a day for drinking and basic needs, including washing and cooking; in Gaza, 3 litres a day are available. People are desperate for food, water, have left their homes and yet remain in danger from bombardment and death.

Into this tragedy, I heard an interview with the son of one of the hostages the other day. His Jewish mother lived in the desert kibbutz attacked by Hamas, where he himself had been raised. He remembered that she had taught herself Arabic to communicate with her Palestinian neighbours, and would cross the border to visit there often when he was a child. He said he liked to imagine her speaking with those who had taken her hostage, in their own language, finding common ground. Otherwise, he said, I will follow the negative thoughts I have and that will lead nowhere good. We need to move beyond our rage, he said.

He had heard stories of looting, of Palestinians stealing belongings from the hostages' houses, to give them to their children, for a better life. He said, this is an act of hope, as it is aiming for a better future for our children. His family would be angry with him for saying this, he acknowledged, but repeated, we must move beyond our rage.

I spoke with a Jewish student at Creative Vespers, here in this Chapel, who said he had family in Israel, but also friends in Palestine, and each side wanted him to hate the others, to take a clear side. I am resisting, he said. Everyone is in pain, he said. There must be a way to hear everyone's pain and not retaliate. You are, I responded, on sacred ground.

And my third story is closer to home. A homeless man, hopelessly drunk, fell and struck his head outside King's earlier this week. An ambulance was called, but took over two hours to arrive. Late in this waiting period I

was called to the scene. A passer-by was with him, and one of our students. They had remained with him as he waited, even though he was insensible, unable to appreciate what they were doing. A young man, possibly another student, left the College and said 'the College's response to this is disgraceful'.

What, I wondered, are you doing? We are here, with the man, waiting for the ambulance. The student alongside him, first aid trained, had waited to report his assessment to the paramedics, even though he was expected at a choir rehearsal and performance. Who was the Pharisee, finding fault, in this modern day story, and who was the good neighbour?

And who are we?

Three stories from our world today, where God's love is so very needed. In each, an example of how this love could be, and has been, sacrificially, expressed.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart....and...thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Matt 22.37, 39) May it be so.

Amen.

The Revd Dr Mary Kells

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