

Reflection for worship 25th October 2020

There is a scene in the film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood* that really stuck with me. For those who don't know, this film chronicles a time in the life of Mr Rogers, a much beloved American star of a television program for children, as he interacts with Lloyd Vogel, a cynical reporter who is trying to find out who the real Mr Rogers is.

In this scene, the two are at a restaurant about to eat some lunch.

Rogers says that something he thinks is a good practice is to ask people to close their eyes, and imagine all the people who have loved them into being. And he asks Vogel, an angry, modern man, to do this. Vogel initially responds that he can't, but something about Rogers breaks his walls down and he tries it.

There is a long moment of quiet as both men sit silently with their eyes closed. And one by one the surrounding tables fall silent as all the other patrons too close their eyes, realising something important is happening. Complete silence falls as everyone breathes in this beautiful moment. Soon Vogel is in tears, having sat for a just a moment witnessing the long chain of people who had loved him into being. It's a sacred, worshipful moment.

What would your list look like, if you did the same thing?

You'd have your family, I hope, perhaps your friends. But if you think about what the phrase 'loved you into being' implies you could really stretch your mind back to grandparents, great grandparents, great-great grandparents and so on.

But what about all the people whose love has made a difference in your life that you don't know about? Perhaps someone gave your great grandad a job when no one else would, which meant he could get married, or perhaps there was a neighbour who brought your mother biscuits as a gesture of kindness she needed to continue the hard work of motherhood.

we could obviously speculate about all this for ages, and actually I urge you to try this some time. It is a powerful thing.

I suspect Mr Rogers knew that love too is a powerful thing. Powerful enough to shape lives, to call people into themselves, powerful enough to break the heart of a man like Lloyd Vogel.

So obviously we're here today to talk about love. A powerful, changing thing according to Mr Rogers, and a command on which all the rest of God's law and all the prophets hang, according to Jesus.

He's been asked a series of questions designed to make him stumble, and has danced gracefully through them all. Then comes, which is the greatest commandment? Which could be a further test, but also could be a legitimate question for someone who has by now proved himself a decent teacher.

So they ask him and he says

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself.

These are both not new, they are, as the question suggests, commandments from the over 600 available in the Jewish law. It's not hugely shocking for Jesus to have answered in this way I think.

But we do know there is something particular about Jesus offering these two, and saying as he does that the law, or the Jew's way of being close to God, and the prophets, who were a series of people receiving revelations and offering guidance straight from God, all hang on these two.

When phrased like that I think his answer sounds either too small, or too big. Let me explain.

With that much weight on it, all the law and the prophets, you might think something more than simply having rosy feelings toward your neighbour would make the cut. Perhaps no idols, or something about proper worship. But no, love. Love is what is at the centre of it all according to Jesus.

And it's then, when you start breaking down what that means, what it looks like, that it begins to swing the other way and these commands, or one joint command really, seem heavy enough that no one could ever aspire to keep them.

It feels again like the other week when we were talking to Paul about his encouragements 'oh just love God with all your soul, mind and strength and also love your neighbour as yourself' easy peasy.

But wait, how can we possibly do this? And who is my neighbour anyhow, and what if I don't love myself?

What does it mean to love God with all of our souls, our minds, our very strength?

How can you summon the will, wrangle your inner most self, put all of you into love for God? When you really drill down, what does this mean, love God?

Because some days I do, I can feel within myself a feeling of ease and lightness and I am grateful and I love God. But what about the days we forget to think about God. What about when we're angry at God, or we just find it impossible to manage the task of loving God with all of us? None of us love God like this, with ALL of us, not all the time.

It's possible of course that thankfully, loving God like this is not contingent upon us carrying a flame of passion brightly burning all the time within our chests.

So what? We put God above all other interests perhaps. We are supposed to love God with all our will after all.

Something I read this week talked about a minister chatting with someone from their church, who said they couldn't make worship the next week because their sports team was practicing at that time or something like that. The minister in response guilted them about where their loyalties lie, and the person was challenged and kept coming to church on time.

Is this what putting God first means? True sometimes our lives of faith clash with other priorities, but I don't want to align attending a service at church with holding God at the centre of our lives necessarily, though hopefully it's helpful.

I don't think this is about being guilted into living out the machinations of a good Christian life; prayer, worship, spending time with scripture *are* all things which hopefully pull you closer to the heart of God.

But Jesus' answer to the question offered to the Pharisees once again isn't about right worship, or the study of scriptures.

And, it's not just love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. It's love your neighbour as yourself as well. These two hang together.

It is possible that to love God in this way, we must do more than attend church on time, or feel a certain way inside. It's possible of course that here love is a verb. It's not a feeling.

Jesus knew the law, he knew the commandments. If he'd wanted to he could have offered other choices. He could have suggested that the heart of all of it was proper worship, or bravery, or the performance of piety, or giving to the church. But, he wasn't interested in that. He was interested in a life of love,

love that is more than show or feeling or status. He knew that love was an easy thing to say and a harder thing to live, because he lived it.

Jesus showed us a life of love that is actioned to the point of death. Jesus showed us a life not bogged down by how he was feeling at any particular moment, or being preoccupied with looking after himself or his circle of friends or his family to the point where he forgot to look to anyone else.

He showed us that love is an action, a movement. It is seeing in that other person a need that is as important to you as your own. And it's good actually because love like this gives us steps to follow when we aren't feeling particularly loving at all.

If you look at your neighbour or indeed your enemy, you are often unlikely to feel as if you love them. But this is not what we are called to do. We are called to love them. to do the work of loving them. visit the imprisoned, love the unlovable, clothe the naked, seek justice for the poor, comfort the grieving.

What would it cost us to care for another's life and wellness as if it was our own?

We generally want the best for people sure but when it counts, when it costs something – our time, our will, our perseverance, our resources- it becomes harder to maintain, or somehow, mysteriously, easier to overlook.

This passage sometimes has a very feel good element to it, but it has an edge. This sort of love costs something, as Jesus was well aware of.

How do we live like this? How do we sustain the kind of love that actions our command to love God?

Debie Thomas from the blog Journey with Jesus has some thoughts.

“Neither can we love ourselves or our neighbours in any meaningful, sustainable way if that love is not sourced and replenished in an abiding love for God. Only God's love is inexhaustible; if we cut ourselves off from the flow of God's compassion, we will quickly run dry. In other words, the motion of our hearts must be cyclical — love of God making possible and deepening our love of neighbour, and love of neighbour putting flesh and bones on our love for God.”

I love the idea that it's all caught up together. And of course it is. As much as I said earlier this is about practically loving people, and it is, we can only do this,

we can only live the way that Jesus modelled if we're seeking the heart of God. Looking around us with eyes that try to see God in all we meet, hoping for that deepening of love that makes us seek someone else's betterment and thriving in the way we seek our own.

Mr Rogers was a good man. He gave each person he met his time because he was convinced they were each a gift. He wasn't perfect, this didn't necessarily come naturally to him. To help him exercise anger and maintain the love he had for the world he swam laps every day, he read scripture, and he prayed for people by name, and this helped him love people into being.

Love is sometimes hard, particularly love that asks us to walk into discomfort and self-sacrifice and maybe even pain. But maybe it should be because it's also powerful. Love changes things, shapes people, draws us closer to the love that is at the heart of everything, changes who we in fact are.

Love is more than behaviour, more than a feeling. It's more than simply attending your church. It's a life allowing God's love for you to help you seek the heart of others, God's love moving out of you in movement toward the other. It's all caught up together.

It's loving others into their being, as you are loved into yours.