

# Very Near to You

*St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw*

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2019 [15] Year C

*Deuteronomy 30.9-14, Luke 10.25-37*

*...the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deuteronomy 30.14)*

Our texts this morning focus on the two foundation stones of our faith. Mark and Matthew record Jesus being asked by a scribe or lawyer (a student of the law of Moses):

“Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-32)

Similar words are used in Matthew (22:35-40). The first commandment is from an earlier section of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and is recited at the beginning of the daily Jewish prayer known as the Shema (to hear or listen). The second part, concerning love of neighbour, is based on Leviticus 19:18.

Following the rabbinic tradition of dialogue by questioning, in Luke’s gospel it is a lawyer who provides this answer to his own question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The great commandment is a textbook answer, which rolls off his tongue with great familiarity: Jesus affirms this is the right answer and says “do this, and you will live” – just as at the conclusion of the parable of the Samaritan he says “go and do likewise.” Jesus is emphasising that these commandments need to put into action, to be carried through, enacted - ‘go and do’ – find opportunities to do these great things, to put love into action, “and you will live.”

To inherit eternal life in this way, then, is not a far-off goal – in the imagery of Deuteronomy, we do not have to cross to the other side of the sea, or ascend to heaven before we can take hold of this inheritance. This promise is about the quality of life in the present – it is about sharing in the life of God. The divine word is “very near to *you*; it is in *your* mouth and in *your* heart for *you* to observe.”

Perhaps because we use the label “commandment” it is easy to overlook the intuitive nature of this life. This teaching is not about fulfilling an obligation to a heavenly king that demands to be worshipped – but is a challenge to experience the nature of God in our bones – engaging our hearts, souls, and minds to the limit of our endurance.

There is a very clear link between the two commandments to love God and our neighbour – love of neighbour is not just an afterthought, but flows on from the first great love – it is the way in which we share in the life of God. One of the desert fathers beloved by the Orthodox Church, Dorotheos of Gaza 505-565, helps us to visualise this:

Imagine that the world is a circle, that God is the centre,  
and that the radii are the different ways human beings live.  
When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the centre of the circle,  
they come closer to one another at the same time as to God.  
The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another.  
And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.<sup>i</sup>

This is how the actions of the Samaritan differed from the priest and the Levite (from the priestly tribe of Levi who held some position in a temple). Perhaps the implication is that they feared the impurity of a “half dead” person. They might also simply share our human weakness and fear of those who might demand something from us. They – and perhaps we have done this also – cross the road and pass by. They put a distance between themselves and the person who so obviously needs help. But the Samaritan, from an enemy tribe with a long history of violent conflict with the Jews, listened to the promptings of his heart and “came near.” “He went to him” rather than hurrying away.

The story tells us that eternal life is known in such acts of love - we draw near to it as we come near to one another. So in answer to the second question, “And who is my neighbour” Jesus tells us it is the one who comes near to us, or the one that we draw close to - not just the one who happens to be somewhere in our vicinity, or part of our tribe.<sup>ii</sup>

There are so many mysteries about being human – why do we resist intimacy – why do we stay away? The instinct for self-preservation is sometimes healthy but does not always serve us well. As we listen to our hearts, our souls, and our minds, I think we know (for God’s “word is on our mouth and in our heart to observe”) when we cross the line – cross the road - from self-care into selfishness – because it just doesn’t feel right. Dorotheos, the desert father quoted earlier, expressed it this way:

When God created [us] He sowed in [us] something divine, a certain thought which has in itself, like a spark, both light and warmth; a thought which enlightens the mind and indicates to it what is good and what is evil—this is called conscience, and it is a natural law.

Christ ‘reveals and moves’ this conscience, he writes, re-igniting the buried spark.<sup>iii</sup> We, just like the lawyer, know the answer to the question “which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” And it is question we might often stop and ask ourselves in a different form – “which of these courses of action will I take? Which will take me closer to the centre of the circle where all paths converge in the love of God?”

Nearness is the key to eternal life. God comes near us in the incarnation – in Christ who taught us to pray for the kingdom to come and, in less familiar words, that we might know the presence of the sacred name, the word of life, whose longings might become our longings both in heart and in action.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, The Sixth Instruction

<sup>ii</sup> Inspired by Karoline Lewis, The Need for Nearness, Sunday, July 03, 2016. Luther Seminary, Dear Working Preacher website (<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4685>)

<sup>iii</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, The Third Instruction.

<sup>iv</sup> John Phillip Newell, Casa del Sol Prayer of Jesus (Lord’s Prayer) / Celtic Mass for Peace