**Reflection for Safeguarding Sunday 2022**

**Isaiah 41:10 and 13**

**Mark 12:28-34**

Don’t you just hate those tricky theological questions that people ask, particularly children. “Who created God?”; “Will my cat go to heaven?”; “Why did God make mosquitos?” Sometimes I think they just trying to be difficult - to catch me out or test me. But often these questions are borne out of genuine concerns. So, in our reading from Mark’s gospel, the teacher of the law is portrayed as an honest questioner in search of the truth.

Jesus was asked, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” This was a question that would have been commonly discussed by the rabbis, attempting to summarise the hundreds of demands of the Jewish law. The issue was not really which of the commandments was the most important, but whether there was some basic principle from which the whole law could be derived.

Jesus’ reply to the question was quite conventional. He began by quoting from the first verses of the Shema - a profession of faith recited daily by devout Jews and which draws on texts that we find in the books of Deuteronomy and Numbers.

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord! Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”.

But asked for one commandment, Jesus gave two. “A second is like it...”

‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’

Again, Jesus drew on the Hebrew scriptures - this time from Leviticus where the assembly of Israel were ordered to love their neighbour as themselves. And it is clear that Jesus saw this second command as arising from the command to love God - the two going together, inextricably linked.

But what does it mean when we are commanded to love in this way? It isn’t simply that we are meant to feel an emotion with regard to God or the people around us. This is not about fuzzy feelings. It is about how we live our lives - every day.

Jesus proceeded to say that obeying these two commandments was much more important than ‘all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices’. In other words, our attitudes and behaviour - both in relation to God and to those around us – are more significant than religious observance.

This was not a new idea – in making this bold statement Jesus was standing in a long prophetic tradition in Judaism. Time and time again in the Hebrew scriptures prophets issued a call to repentance, pointing out that being religious, offering devotion and worship (‘whole burnt offerings and sacrifices’), was worth nothing to God if it didn’t translate into right actions towards other human beings. We hear this when Samuel called out the sins of King Saul; when Hosea prophesied to the northern tribes. We hear it in the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah. And we find it in the book of Psalms. Listen to the power of that prophetic call:

Amos 5:21-24:

I hate, (says the Lord) I despise your festivals,

And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

And the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps,

But let justice roll down like waters,

And righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Micah 6:6-8:

With what shall I come before the Lord,

and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,

with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,

the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

Isaiah 1:11,16-17

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats…..

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil;
learn to do good;
seek justice;
rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan;
plead for the widow.

These are powerful calls to return to a righteous way of life. When Jesus said that loving God and loving neighbour was so much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices .. this is what he meant us to do. To live humbly before God and to act mercifully. To work for justice and to defend and protect the vulnerable. These prophets show us what true love of God twinned with genuine love and concern for our neighbours actually looks like.

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus follows this, or a similar conversation about the greatest commandment, with what we know as the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story the focus is on those who encounter a victim of a violent assault on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The first two of these passers-by are representatives of the religious community – the priest and the Levite, and they offer no assistance The third is a Samaritan who does come to the victim’s aid.

Journalist and survivor advocate. Andrew Graystone, in his tract ‘Falling Among Thieves – understanding and relating to church related abuse’, writes this:

‘In the first assault, by the thieves, the man is robbed of his property, his clothing, his dignity. In the second assault, by the priest and the Levite, he is robbed of his identity, his self-worth, and his hope for recovery. This is contrasted with the grace evidenced in the relationship between the victim and the Samaritan.’

He continues ‘The priest and the Levite do not simply ignore the needs of the victim. The story makes a point of the fact that they see the victim but make a choice to define themselves against him. They do not just walk past; they cross the road. ..’

This is what both puzzles and re-abuses victims and survivors of church related abuse most of all – the way we, the church, who are supposed to follow the example and teaching of Christ, won’t listen, won’t see, don’t offer the care they need, don’t rush towards them with support and redress. We do not act as a good neighbour. Instead, we act like that priest and that Levite.

So, how can we apply the teaching of Jesus about the greatest commandments specifically to safeguarding in our churches and church projects? Well, if we are to truly love God and neighbour then we need to start by responding well to victims and survivors of abuse. We also need to open our eyes to what is going on around us. We need to work hard to ensure that the most vulnerable in our churches and projects are safeguarded. We need to engage fully in the training that will help us establish a healthy culture in our churches and learn how to make them safer. The good news is that this is not a distraction from our mission or peripheral to our gospel, it is at the very core of who we are called to be as followers of Jesus, it is central to our worship and our ministry. In engaging wholeheartedly in safeguarding we are loving our neighbours as ourselves and that is intertwined with us loving and truly worshipping God. And if we do this then we will not be far from the kingdom of heaven.