

Love God and Your Neighbour

Passengers on the bus watched sympathetically as the attractive young woman with the white cane made her way carefully up the steps. She paid the driver and, using her hands to feel her way, walked down the bus and sat down. It had been a year since Susan, 34, became blind due to a medical misdiagnosis. A fiercely independent woman, she was thrown into a dark, angry, frustrated and self-pitying world, a powerless and helpless burden on others. She had only husband Mark to rely on.

Mark, an air force pilot, had watched his wife sink into depths of despair. Watching her rant and rave, weep and pray to exhaustion he was determined to help her gain her confidence and strength back. Susan did return to work. At first Mark drove her across the city every day in his car, a journey that was hectic and costly. So he promised her that he would accompany her on the bus every day until she had confidence to do it on her own. For two weeks Mark, military uniform and all, did just that. From Susan's work he would take a cab across the city to his base. He taught her how to rely on her other senses, he helped her befriend the bus drivers; he made her laugh, even on days when she tripped and fell and dropped her briefcase and cried.

Mark knew that it would be only a matter of time before Susan did it. And she did. Before she left, that Monday morning, she threw her arms around her longstanding bus companion, husband and best friend. They said their goodbyes. She wept tears of gratitude for his loyalty, patience and love. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday all went well. On Friday the bus driver said: "Boy I sure do envy you". Confused and hesitant that he was speaking to someone else, Susan replies: "Why on earth would you envy ME". The driver responded: "It must feel so good to be taken care of and protected like you are." Susan had no idea what he was talking about. All week she had struggled so hard, to get to work and here he is saying that he envied her. The driver continued: "You know what I mean, all week, a fine looking gentleman in a military uniform has been standing across the road, watching you get on and off the bus. He makes sure you cross the street safely and he watches you into your office building. He blows you a kiss, gives you a salute and walks away. You are one lucky lady." She hadn't known. Susan burst out crying as she realised that Mark had given her a gift far, far more powerful than sight and she didn't even know about it.

This story, by an unknown author, from Alice Gray and Barbara Baumgardner's *Compilation of Stories for the Heart*¹, shouts love to us. The actions of the main characters illustrate the power of love. Widening it out further from those daily bus journeys we see God's love for us, unseen by us, unknown to us, as we fumble around in our own, often dark and confused world. Deeper, too, this story talks to us about the dichotomy between freedom and love. We can understandably ask: is freedom the basic component of the Gospel or is it love? How can love grow unless it is free? Love cannot be forced or manipulated. In our story air force pilot Mark's love for Susan was so freely given. Even God does not force his love upon anyone who does not want it. But we can also ask: surely love must be in place first it is only in an atmosphere of true love that freedom can be achieved? The slightest sign of self-interest, suspicion, rivalry, pride or anything else and freedom will be lost. If people

¹ Stories for the Heart (2000) p94

try to force themselves and their views onto others for their own ends, freedom is lost. There is no love. The proof of God's prior love for us is surely that he allows the freedom to accept him or reject him. Is not Susan's daily terrifying ordeal to ride on the bus illustrative of Mark's selfless love, a love to make her feel free yet built first on Mark's own freedom to choose to love.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind...and love your neighbour as you love yourself." Jesus says that the whole Law of Moses depends on these. This worries a lot of people who say that without a set of laws human weakness will cause a Christian's life to collapse. The answer to these concerns lies in recognising what is involved in Jesus' words. The love, of which Jesus talks, is not a vague, wishy-washy concept we can take at times and leave at others. It is a mighty tough, if not impossible ask of us. If we love God and our neighbour there is no room for selfishness, no licence to hurt or harm, or try to mould others, or pass judgement, or discriminate or ignore. Love, Jesus says, allows us to be free for our neighbours not from our neighbours – free for our world and not from it. William Blake wrote: "Love seeketh not itself to please, nor itself hath any care but for another gives its ease and builds a Heaven in Hell's despair." And that is exactly what Mark did for Susan. Yet, although he was her husband, Mark was free to show his compassionate love for Susan or not. We have that same freedom to choose.

The timing of our Gospel this morning is Passion Week. There was mounting anger and hatred for Jesus. The authorities were plotting his murder. At every opportunity they tried to catch him out and find reason to arrest and kill him. In their view he was a threat to their doctrine, power base, to their lives. They had tested him politically, and theologically. Now they were testing him spiritually. When asked about the commandments the Pharisees wanted Jesus to affirm that He was somehow something or someone above and greater than Moses. If Jesus is who they think he is, a man with a huge ego trying to establish himself as Messiah, if he is as false as they think he is, then he is going to say he is above Moses and if he says that, in one go he will have blasphemed and they will discredit him for good. Unfortunately for them he quotes the Law of Moses by saying: Love God with your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole mind. And unfortunately for them too, they are all called to get involved.

Love for God, Jesus is saying, must be perfectly balanced. Wow! An intelligent love, an emotional love, a practical love and a spiritual love – all aspects illustrated in the story of the bus passenger! Can there be any more amazing definition of us as Christians than to be people who love God? It was St Teresa of Avila who said: "accustom yourself continually to make many acts of love, for they enkindle and melt the soul" Can we claim to be a Christian if we do not have a love for God? Not just a belief, but a love which should stretch our capabilities and capacities to the limit.

He must have looked the Pharisees straight in the eyes when he said this for in Chapter 23 we read, in verses 13 and 14, 15 and 23, 25 and 27 and 29, that Jesus repeatedly calls the scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, prefixing each time with the words "How terrible for you...!" A hypocrite has so much on the outside only to be found to have nothing on the inside. Outside the scribes and Pharisees had the outward appearance of righteous piety, going through religious ritual for self-satisfaction and a satisfaction of their egos. Jesus claims they had nothing inside.

It was Mother Theresa who said that she had discovered the paradox that if you love until it hurts there can be no more hurt, only more love. And our paradox is that as we love God, from the inside out, we can do no other than love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Mark, in our story shows a love that God asks for. More than that, as he stood and watched Susan, who was blissfully unaware of his presence, as she fumbled her way in her (literally) dark world on and off the bus and into work, he reflects God's first love for us. Barbara de Angelis wrote: "love is a force more formidable than any other. It is invisible – it cannot be seen or measured yet it is powerful to transform you in a moment and offer you more joy than any material possession." Jesus says that these are the two greatest commandments. What other rules, regulations or laws do we require when we know that we will be spending the rest of our lives trying to follow these two commandments.

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