

Morning Service Sunday 25th October – led by John Wainwright

Good to have John and Sue back with us again. And a pleasure to sing Happy Birthday to Sue - as well as to Chris Ramsay who was celebrating her 80th birthday. Which meant cake for us all after the Service!

Buoyed up by advice from his late mother's college principal that there was "nothing wrong with using good material more than once; if it is not worth repeating, perhaps it was not worth using in the first place", John presented us with a memory test. He showed us an object and asked if we recognised it. In fact, we needed to go back to January 2022, because it was a Mezuzah, traditionally fixed to the entrance of a Jewish home, and inside was a small parchment scroll, the text of which began with the Shema—the Hebrew word meaning "hear":

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

This was one of the Bible's central teachings; followed by the command to love your neighbour as yourself. And that was John's theme for the day.



Love God, Love Your Neighbour, Love Yourself

"Love" could describe many kinds of affection: love for God, between spouses, between parents and children, for animals, or for creation - though English used one word for a wide range of experiences. Jesus had identified the greatest commandment as loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Why should we love God? Because God first loved us.

Whilst some religions portrayed people as appeasing a deity to avoid harm or gain an advantage, the Christian message was different. John 3:16 said that God loved the world and sent His only Son so that whoever believed in Him need not perish but would have eternal life. That promise gave hope for life beyond death, but it also offered a loving relationship with God here and now.

Scripture presented a God who desired a personal relationship with us. We did not need another person to mediate every encounter; we could approach God directly. When Moses had asked whom he should name as the One who had sent him to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt, God had replied, "I am." The name pointed to God's abiding presence. God had been with us in the past and promised to be with us in the future, but above all He was present with us now. We could experience that presence in church, but also in the quietness of a room, at home, or anywhere else.

With All Our Heart - John Wesley had spoken of the "warmed heart." Faith was more than academic knowledge about God or the Bible; it was a living relationship that awakened passion and devotion. One of the strengths of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements was their renewed emphasis on heartfelt love for God.

With All Our Soul - not a word we used often today, but here it suggested the whole self. Loving God with the soul was expressed through our way of life. We were called to live fully in the world without allowing its values to govern us. We could not divide ourselves into separate public and private selves: Christian faithfulness applied in both spheres. None of us was perfect; the important question was whether we acknowledged our sin and whether our relationship with God was changing us. By God's grace, it should make a visible difference in our character.

With All Our Mind - Peter's first epistle urged Christians to be ready to give a reason for the hope within them. Loving God with the mind meant understanding why we believed and learning to answer sincere questions about faith. That might require training, regular worship, reading, and thoughtful discussion.

With All Our Strength - Love was not a soft option. Christian organisations supporting persecuted believers or defending Christian convictions often faced determined opposition. Loving God with our strength meant acting with courage, perseverance, and practical commitment.

Loving Our Neighbour - We were also commanded to love our neighbour as ourselves. This did not require agreement with everyone, nor did it mean avoiding every conflict. Jesus made peace, but He did not pretend agreement with the Pharisees when truth was at stake. To love our neighbour was to seek another person's good, even amid disagreement.

Love began at home - with respect for spouses, children, parents, and other relatives. We would not always agree, but patient respect helped relationships endure.

Within the Church - we might believe that we were right, but we still needed to listen. As John Wesley had emphasised, disagreement did not need to destroy love. Christians could disagree honestly while continuing to respect one another. Love also required practical care. When did *we* last ask about someone's wellbeing, telephone a person who *was* unwell, write to someone facing a difficult time, or visit someone who felt isolated? *And this* should extend beyond our own congregation to Christians in other local churches, including those who worshipped differently from us. The early Church *had* sometimes *been* described with the words, "See how these Christians love one another." Its members were not free from disagreement, but their mutual care *had been* distinctive.

Anyone in Need - through the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus had shown that our neighbour was anyone in need. Loving someone did not always mean giving money; that might not be the wisest response. It meant showing concern, seeking the person's good, and demonstrating Christian compassion in a practical way. Sometimes people first became curious about faith because a Christian had treated them with unexpected kindness.

Loving Ourselves Rightly - the command said, "Love your neighbour as yourself." That could sound peculiar, because Christians might hesitate to speak positively about themselves. Yet healthy self-respect was not the same as pride. We could recognise our God-given value and gifts without becoming conceited. If God considered us worth sending Jesus to die for, then surely we had value. We might make mistakes and repeatedly let God down, yet He still loved us and called us to extend that love to others.

Loving ourselves included: caring responsibly for our bodies; eating and drinking wisely; taking appropriate exercise; recognising our gifts; and using those gifts for God's glory.

And John concluded with, "May God help us to love Him more, to love our neighbours more, and to rejoice in His love for us as His children". Amen.

And we were very pleased to have Stephen Jones (well at least his top half!) back to provide the music for our Service. His recovery from a hip operation was progressing well, but the legs were not yet up to operating the foot pedals of our organ. But we've not long to wait.

