

# Love God; Love your Neighbour ...

*... Where do we go from here?*

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*A sermon given on Eighteenth Sunday After Trinity, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service*

*Matthew 22:34-46*

If there is one phrase that makes me want to dive for cover, it's the phrase 'Vision Strategy'. I suspect I am not alone, and that for many others this is a phrase which can be a turn-off. It may make us think of the banality of 'management-speak' where words become a substitute for action. In the Church context, it may feel as though the people of God are aping secular organisations and we are substituting the ephemeral fashions of the day for the eternal word of God. So I wonder what Jesus's disciples felt when he gave them what is, for all intents and purposes, a Vision Statement: *"You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

If you think about it, that summary of the law is very like a modern vision statement. It sets out an ideal, a vision of perfection: love God and love your neighbour. And because it's an ideal, it risks being dismissed as just words, an irrelevant dreaming that bears no relation to the real world: who could possibly love God so purely with all their being; who could possibly love their neighbour as themselves, especially when Jesus elsewhere defines the category of neighbour to include enemies, foreigners, heretics, immigrants, in fact, everybody? On the other hand, the challenge to love God and love neighbour can be heard as something inspiring, something that gives us a clear idea of what we're about, what we are here for. We may not be very good at loving either God or neighbour or indeed ourselves, come to that, but at least we know what God expects of us. The command to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves becomes a kind of guiding star, far above us and out of reach maybe, but always there, always visible, and always showing us which way to go. And that's, I think, is how a good vision statement should work.

And that's how we will be presenting to you the new Vision Strategy for Beverley Minster. After the service we'll be talking through the four headings of the New Vision strategy, which in some ways are just variations on love God and love your neighbour as yourself. The headings talk about - **seeking** to become more like Christ

through deepening our faith (and love of God); **reaching** those we currently don't (loving our neighbour); **growing** as a Church of missionary disciples (so doing those two things as a community); and **transforming** our finances and structures to make it all possible. But you could say the whole thing is just about loving God and loving our neighbour. In the end, that's what we're trying to remind ourselves of, so that we don't just keep doing what we've always done in the past without thinking about it. And the presentation after the service won't just be about a new vision statement - it's a new vision strategy which tries to move beyond the unchanging guiding star kind of statement, and think about what we might actually have to do differently in order to follow it.

Church vision statements sometimes stop short: having set out a clear sense of what a Church's purpose might be, they often don't say much about what you then have to do in order to make the vision more of a reality. So we shall be offering not just the vision but the strategy to go with it, so that together we can start working out what we might have to do in order to become more like Christ, to reach those we currently don't, to grow as a Church of missionary disciples and to transform our finances and structures. That process can and should involve all of us, just as loving God and loving our neighbour can and should involve all of us.

In fact, if you look at the history of Beverley Minster down the ages, you can see how people here have always been trying to love God and love neighbour, but we've shown it in different ways. In the early days, John of Beverley founded a monastic community which people joined because they wanted to know more of God's love and work out what loving God looks like. And that community became the means of spreading the gospel across the entire region and reaching those who previously didn't know God's love. Later in the days of King Athelstan the Minster community's love of God showed itself in a growing awareness of God's grace and compassion and justice, leading to the establishment of a 'right of sanctuary' here where offenders could find a breathing space in the face of a vengeful law. Then, in high days of pilgrimage to the shrine of John of Beverley, the shrine here provided an important focus for people wanting to deepen their love of God. They could draw near to God here in prayer and then they could go back home, strengthened to love their neighbour. And after the Reformation, the Minster became a Parish Church with a more static Ministry. Love of God and love of neighbour was worked out in

everyday rhythms and routines of life, not just within the Church congregation but across the Parish as a whole.

And now we're finding that we're having to rethink what it means to love God and love neighbour. Fewer people are finding that the traditional routines of a Parish Church are igniting any fresh love for God. Even some regular churchgoers complain that worship no longer nourishes them enough, and their love for God is in danger of growing cold. And as that happens, and as the gap between Church and society widens, there's a temptation for a congregation to become more inward looking and focus on itself, and it becomes harder to demonstrate our love for our neighbour in the wider community as a Church community. So this is a good moment to remind ourselves of why we're here: to love God and love our neighbour in the broadest sense, as ourselves, and to ask what that might look like? What does it take to excite people again about the love of God? What should we be doing to demonstrate love for our neighbours, both inside and outside the Church? These are important questions. I hope they are exciting questions, too. The answers are not ready-made, but our vision strategy offers a way of grappling with the questions so that together we can find new ways to love God and love our neighbour.

I hope that you'll feel able to join in with it. I hope you'll be able to pray about it and to encourage one another to engage with it, talk about it, think about what it means.

I hope you'll find it energising, and I hope that it will take all of us into a deeper knowledge and experience of the love that never lets us go, so that we may know the love of God in our hearts and that we may show it in our day to day living.

Amen.

## Reading Text

Matthew 22:34-46

<sup>34</sup> When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup> and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" <sup>37</sup> He said to him, " "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." <sup>41</sup> Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: <sup>42</sup> "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." <sup>43</sup> He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, <sup>44</sup> "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" '? <sup>45</sup> If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" <sup>46</sup> No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.