

**Sermon for 8.00 a.m. Sunday 3 October 2021 –
18th Sunday after Trinity – 1 Corinthians 1: 4 –
8; Matthew 22: 34 - end**

I want to think today about our Gospel passage which we just heard. In particular Jesus' reply to some fairly hostile questioning about which commandment is the greatest. Jesus says this "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself"

Loving God and loving neighbour. They're such famous words aren't they? And I suspect we may find it easier to think and talk about how we love our neighbour than about how we love God. Today in St Michael's we're celebrating Harvest Festival – as you can probably tell from looking around! It's a time when we give thanks for God's goodness to us – and we bring gifts of food to church to give to the Food Bank. We also support the Bishop of St Albans Harvest Appeal – this year it's an appeal to provide clean

water to people in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And there are lots of other ways in which we probably all do our best to love our neighbours and seek to be kind to one another as we're able to.

But what about loving God? Well, what do we do when we love someone? Firstly, above all, we want to spend time with them I think. For me, in the case of my children, who are grown up – I want to spend as much time as I can – and as much time as they will let me spend with them – given that they have busy lives too. I have to recognise that they're not always available – they don't always have time for me.

But God is always available to us. He's never too busy. He always has time for us. He's always waiting for us to come to him. Think of the picture of the old man at the end of the story of the Prodigal Son. His son has gone away, taking his share of the inheritance with him. When he has squandered it, he decides to come home and throw himself on the mercy of his father. As he arrives, when he's still in the

distance, his father is already there – eyes straining to the horizon, waiting for him, eager to welcome him back.

Well, God is like that – like a parent who always has time for us – longs for us to come back. We love God because He first loves us.

So to love God means to spend time with Him – perhaps alone in prayer – at home, or when we’re out for a walk, or perhaps in company with others as we worship together in church.

Secondly, if we love someone we want to do things that will make them happy. We want to join in with what they’re doing. And this is where the two halves of what Jesus says connect up. Because of course it pleases God when we love our neighbours as ourselves.

But I’d like to finish this morning by reading you a short poem by George Herbert – a poet who is roughly contemporary with the Book of Common Prayer. It’s about how God loves us. You have to imagine God is the host, and he’s invited you to a meal. And God is love.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
from my first entrance in

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning if I
lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here: Love
said, you shall be he.

I, the unkinde, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, I cannot
look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, Who
made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my
shame go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the
blame? My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my
meat: So I did sit and eat.

(George Herbert 1593 – 1633)