



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Racial Justice Sunday

(2nd Before Lent)

Love your Neighbour in the kingdom of God

Genesis 1:1 - 2:3

Matthew 6:25-34

8th February 2026

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The theme of love your neighbour, more often than not, focuses on the passage from Luke's gospel. And quite right too, as this is where Jesus teaches us to recognise our neighbour in those who God has created. However, today I would like to reflect on three different passages that are helping me to love my neighbour. Two are from today's readings in Genesis and Matthew and the other from Revelation.

Here in Genesis, we have the latter part of the creation story. '*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...*', says God, '*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them*' [Gen 1:26a, 27a]. Just think on that for a moment. Now think on the fact that every time you look in the mirror, you are looking at the face of God. Bit of a scary thought, that. But as the scripture says, we are made in the image of God, so it is the face and image of God looking back at us when we look in the mirror.

An even more scary fact and thought. Take a look at the person next to, or near to you. Who do you see? A gold star if you said Jesus or God, for that person too, your neighbour, is made in God's image. So, it is God looking back at you. Note the passage does not qualify the image of God in whose likeness we have been created. It does not specify any physical characteristics. It does not provide any categories or sub-sets. Scripture simply says, humankind is made in the image of God. Andrew Knowles likens it to a divine hologram.

Verse 31 of that first chapter of Genesis goes even further to say that 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.' Not just good, but very good. Everything God made was good, but humankind was very good. The definition of good can be open to interpretation; suitable for God's purposes, just as God intended without flaw or defect, harmonious with God's nature, reflecting God's character. Whatever the definition, God was pleased. So pleased that Walter Bruggemann says, 'human persons are honoured, respected and enjoyed by the one who calls them to be and this gives them their inalienable identity.'

We know this identity was marred, spoilt because of sin. The sin of disobedience. The sin of deception. The sin of greed. And it continues through the sin of discrimination, marginalisation, othering and hatred. It continues through the sin of pride, arrogance, and selfishness. It continues through the sin of racism. Though we are made in God's image, sin has robbed us of God's heart. Sin has robbed us of the ability to treat each other with kindness, mutual respect; the desire to value each other in a posture of humility; to love each other as we love ourselves, as we love God. That is what we strive for, is it not? To love God and all that God has created. Especially those created in the image of God.

Or is our striving more personal, concentrating just on ourselves, our own beliefs, needs and wants at the expense of others? Turning a blind eye as the Priest and the Levite did when they passed by on the other side to avoid the man who had been stripped, beaten and left for dead. Are we concerned with caring for God's creation and how our actions impact our neighbours, or are our worries focused solely on ourselves? Do we care that some of our neighbours through structural injustices do not have a safe place to live or sleep, food to eat, a job to support their family, or even the freedom to just be. Do we care that often we fail to see the image of God in our neighbour. That we fail to see each other through Jesus' eyes. Does it bother us that we are living in a world that, essentially, wants us to harden our hearts against those being oppressed? A world in which justice and peace seem to be mere pipedreams.

This brings me to the passage from Matthew's gospel. Here we have Jesus saying before you strive for all the things you think you need for yourself, strive for the kingdom of God. But

what does the kingdom of God look like? Jesus uses that phrase, the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, over 100 times in the Gospels. Each of the descriptions, mostly in parables, varies and therefore gives a completely different picture of what the kingdom is like. We have the parables of the weeds among the wheat, the mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, pearls, fish caught in a net, the unforgiving servant, the labourers in the vineyard, the wedding banquet, the bridesmaids with their lamps, to name a few. And Jesus taught his disciples, and us by extension, to pray 'thy kingdom come'. So, what kind of kingdom are we striving and praying for?

Well, I like the sound of the kingdom described in John's vision in Revelation 7:9, the '*great multitude...from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...*' The kingdom that represents humankind in all its guises, physically, culturally, ethnically, linguistically. The kingdom in all its colourful diversity, not standing at arm's length or in separate groups or cliques, but as neighbours, together as one before God. Together singing God's praises, worshipping the one who forgives, saves, and redeems. Giving thanks to the Creator in whose image we are all made.

This is the kingdom I want to strive for. The kingdom in which our differences and similarities in Christ are recognised, acknowledged and celebrated. Not used to dehumanize, oppress or divide. Where we welcome, value and love each other, praying that we reflect the face of Christ and that others see Christ in us. Where the fear of difference is a thing of the past, and we no longer have to fight for justice or for peace.

I pray that we will all strive for the kingdom of Revelation 7:9 and that it will be our guide to love our neighbour in the kingdom of God. For if we don't, as Krish Kandiah from Sanctuary Foundation says, there will be a lot of confused Christians in heaven!

Amen