

Inderjit Bhogal, Joanna Collicutt,
David Gregory, Esther Kuku, Sanjee Perera,
Gemma Simmonds and John Swinton



Loving My Neighbour

A Lenten journey

Edited by Olivia Warburton

BRF Lent Book

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List of Bible translations

Scripture quotations marked with the following abbreviations are taken from the version shown. Where no abbreviation is given, the quotation is taken from the same version as the headline reference.

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Introduction

It's never been more important to understand how much God loves us and how much he wants us to love each other.

Loving My Neighbour takes us on a journey through the challenging terrain of how we can truly love one another, individually and in our communities. Daily Bible readings and reflections from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day explore how we can love in truth, love the vulnerable and the suffering, embrace difference, care for our world, and love ourselves as God loves us. Holy Week brings us back to reflect on Christ on the cross, who loved us to the very end.

Focusing right to the heart of discipleship and what living out our faith really looks like, this book brings together well-respected voices from across the church. Sanjee Perera, John Swinton, Esther Kuku, Gemma Simmonds, Inderjit Bhogal, David Gregory and Joanna Collicutt offer a broad and diverse range of perspectives on the biblical imperative to love our neighbour, and provide thoughtful encouragement as we seek to live this out in today's context, through Lent and beyond.

Olivia Warburton



Week 1

Loving in truth



Sanjee Perera, a lay canon at Liverpool Cathedral, is a cognitive psychologist and theologian specialising in identity, moral judgement and decision-making in societies experiencing conflict. She has spent the last couple of decades in academia teaching and researching psychology, sociology, philosophy, theology and religion and holds four theological fellowships and a fellowship in law.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:13 (NIV)

The threshold of Lent, when we remember Jesus' trials as he stormed the courts of justice to determine the cost of love, seems the perfect time to unpack and explore what we mean by love and what it means to love God and our neighbour in truth. To love the other as ourselves, we must first understand the profound truths of who we are and whose image we are made in.

The word 'love' is a blunt instrument in the English language. It is a capricious chameleon that confuses most readers, who often struggle to fully understand the finer nuances of scriptural references to love. More than four Hebrew and more than five Greek concepts that encapsulate love are translated as this one multifaceted word in English.

The King James Version translates the word as 'charity' in its famous deconstruction of love: 'And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity' (1 Corinthians 13:13). Charity, a word used in the early 17th century when the translation was first published, was then considered the highest form of love – selfless and reciprocal. It appears approximately 24 times in the King James Bible, beyond the 442 times that the word 'love' appears.

Humankind, full of war, having contaminated a planet, on the verge of crumbling into the sea, trying to climb up on fractured limbs, is held together by a love borne out in those 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. It is a love conceived in absolute vulnerability and servanthood, and cannot be contained to the frailty of one vessel. It is impossible to love God without loving one's neighbour. We were created to be a mirror, a simulacrum of a bounty of compassion and generosity beyond our understanding.

Lent is the time to kindle our hearth in love and set ablaze our lanterns, for we must be awake to await the bridegroom. We must be a light to the darkness of this world.

Ash Wednesday

The simulacrum of love

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed.

GENESIS 2:7-8 (NIV)

Today, many of us may attend an Ash Wednesday service where we are marked by a sooty, dust and cinder cross. This cross is meant to represent the burnt ashes of our mortality. It is a mark of penance applied by a priest, often with a reminder: 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.' This sets the tone for Lent as we reflect on what it means to be pilgrims on the narrow way, followers of Christ.

So, Ash Wednesday seems a perfect time to go back to Genesis, to our creation story that roots us in our common humanity, made of star dust and divine breath – dust that made the mostly carbon lifeforms we are. As Carl Sagan said, 'The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood... were made in the interiors of collapsing stars.' This was kindled into life by a word so potent and creative that the divine breath that awoke us still reverberates through us, and calls to us.

But is this shared humanity and cosmic genesis our core truth? And what does it mean for the way we live in this fallen world on our dying planet, that we were made in the image of love and made stewards of a garden? In Genesis 3:9, when God seeks out his creation, this image bearer of the divine, he calls out in that lush Eden, 'Where are you?' Adam replies, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid' (v. 10). Even then in the grace of Eden, humankind fails

to see our kinship to this fount of perfect love, or reveal our naked selves, corrupt and culpable, in the gaze of that perfect glory. And this divine question has echoed through the ages: 'Where are you? What have you done?' And like Adam, our reaction to the challenge of living and loving in truth is often a weak defensive excuse, founded in fear and self-preservation.

Recently a newspaper article banner in *The Sunday Times* read: 'Our interest counts more than migrant needs.' It argued that this was about competing human rights, those of citizens and those outside the polis. In Genesis 4:9, the Lord asks Cain, 'Where is your brother?' and Cain asks the Lord, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Our incapacity to love in truth has haunted us from our very genesis. And the Lord reprimands us as he reprimands Cain, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground' (v. 10).

From the beginning, God has made clear that our lives are bound in a selfless love in servanthood and sacrifice to one another. This is the truth demonstrated by the Trinity: the Father, who sought us out from Eden to Gethsemane, calling for his lost and wounded children; the Son, who emptied himself into the fleshy folds of a virgin's womb to live in humility, to be reviled and rejected, and to die on the cross; and the Comforter, who is with us, seeking us, calling to us and setting our hearts aflame when we gather in love to seek him.

We live in a world where many don't believe in a shared humanity, let alone a divine genesis, and submitting to the reflective discipline found in the wilderness of Lent seems an unnecessary exercise. We live in an age where we no longer need to depend on each other, where there is an app for everything and artificial intelligence can manage our needs and comfort. We have Google and Siri to answer life's big questions and Alexa to locate that cup of sugar we need. Neighbours are prying strangers who are an awkward inconvenience in grating proximity.

And yet we live in a world where infants are washed ashore on our beaches and refugees fleeing the shark teeth of danger drown in our

cold English Channel. We have learnt to blind ourselves to this world where children go hungry and the vulnerable and elderly die of cold. We live among those forced into modern slavery, and yet look away from the desperation of the abused and destitute. This is alien to the core truth of our humanity that was made to mirror that perfect love, a simulacrum of the divine. And then the salt in the ashen cross reminds us of Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount:

'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.'

MATTHEW 5:13

It reminds us that we are called to season the tasteless morsels of life and enrich the banquet. That we are the city on the hill, the light of the world and called to love above all else (John 13:34–35), and this is our simulacrum, our truth, our purpose and our salvation.

Prayer

*Creator God, who sought us out in Eden,
who called us each by name in every generation,
who claimed us as your own, made in your image to live
and love in truth:
open our eyes to the love in which we are created,
and call out that love beyond our fears and self-preservation,
into the glory in which it might abound.
Amen.*



Week 3

Loving those who are suffering



Esther Kuku is director of communications and engagement at the Resuscitation Council UK, and a radio presenter for Premier Gospel. She has worked as head of communications for Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust, in international development roles at Tearfund and World Vision and as a national broadcast journalist.

Being steadfast in our faith during tough times can be incredibly hard. Life is full of ebbs and flows, but no matter what we're wrestling with, God has a plan for our lives. Over the next few pages together we will gain a greater understanding as to the purpose of seasons of suffering and how to process pain, both for ourselves and other people.

At some point in our lives, suffering or persecution will confront us. As real as this truth is, the God we serve is bigger than any of the difficulties we face. His word is full of power to heal, and he is the God of all comfort. The enabling power of the Holy Spirit means that we can both acknowledge God and acknowledge our suffering. We don't have to pretend we're okay when we're not, and we shouldn't. Grace means that we can still offer up worship and praise in the middle of what we're going through, knowing that God is still worthy of our praise. His strength empowers us to continue to press in and move forward. Our identity is not what you and I go through, it's what we become on the other side of suffering.

It's vital that we recognise our role when comforting others: we can't fix everyone, as much as we often have the heart and mind to. Leading people to Jesus is just about the best gift we can give, along with the power of community – being there for people and showing up. Even if we don't have the words, let's be present and point one another to the cross.



Sunday

Transforming pain

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

ROMANS 5:1-5 (NIV)

I imagine that in a post-pandemic era, followed by a cost-of-living crisis, the question of why God allows suffering and pain has been especially prevalent. There are some familiar narratives that play out when we talk about trials. One is that an individual is going through suffering as payback for sin. One of Job's misguided friends peddled this notion and suggested that he undertake personal self-examination. This isn't right. Our heavenly Father is a God of mercy and grace.

Romans 5 is packed with reassurance and words of preparation in advance of difficult times. In short order it confirms that the peace of God is ours; that we have access to the grace of God through Christ Jesus. And that this hope doesn't put us to shame, or disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

In this section of scripture, we see the commanding presence of the Trinity: God, through Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I use the word

‘commanding’ here because it’s as if God says: ‘Right, my child is going through it and I’m bringing out the big guns – the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit to ensure complete deliverance.’ He’s totally got our backs!

It’s worth noting when we read Romans that Paul was writing to a group of Christians for whom hope was likely to be in short supply. They lived in the depths of Roman darkness, right under the nose of Caesar himself. What’s more, the regime was hostile to the then new Christian faith, eventually putting Paul himself to death. If you’re going to preach hope to people living under those conditions, you’d better know what you’re talking about!

But Paul wasn’t offering a false hope. This hope is born out of the death of God’s own Son. And you and I have this hope today. We have been justified and we will be delivered out of every difficult circumstance we face. It has nothing to do with our good works – we are set free from pain and suffering because of God’s Son.

Paul admonishes us to rejoice not only in the glory of God, but also in our sufferings. The message here is not that we rejoice because we are suffering, but rather that we glory during hard times. Pain doesn’t produce rejoicing or boasting, but it cannot and shouldn’t stop them. Why? Because God has paved the way for us to persevere, with gifts of grace, peace, love and the comfort of the Holy Spirit for the journey.

I don’t know what you’re going through right now, as you’re reading this. It could be depression, heartache or economic hardship. There is so much that life throws at us that can bring us to our knees. During these times it’s vital to remember that it’s not success that shapes us. Some of the toughest things that we go through are the experiences that make us who we are today.

When we commit to a life of faith and embrace a lifestyle that’s marked by biblical teaching, it doesn’t mean that everything is going to be happy ever after. Quite the opposite. It is therefore necessary to train our minds early on to accept that suffering, disappointment and storms

are still part of the package. Then we can alter our approach to adversity and ask ourselves, ‘How is God going to be glorified in this space? How can I, through grace, do suffering well, so I can boast in the power of his love and a new level of perseverance that suffering brings?’

Josh Longanecker writes: ‘Suffering to the Christian is not a chaotic interruption to our pursuit of happiness, but it is often through the fire of suffering that we find purpose.’⁶ Pain and suffering have redemptive value. We can glory in our suffering knowing that when we come out the other side, we can help comfort others with the same comfort that we have received. Furthermore, our brokenness will draw us closer to the heart of our King. Ultimately God is glorified, and our lives are transformed.

In the end we win. However, we will not proceed painlessly into this victorious future. We will be tested and tried, but his word says we will not be put to shame, and his perfect love that has been poured out and casts out fear will give us capacity to move forward into that abundant life that we have been promised.

Prayer

Dear Lord, I recognise that this Christian walk will not always be easy. Please help me to glorify you in this suffering space, for however long it may be. Help me to make the right decisions and respond well to others. Make your name great in this trial, and I thank you for grace, strength and wisdom as your perfect plan for me unfolds. Amen.



Notes

⁶ Josh Longanecker, ‘Where is God when you are suffering’, blog post, 3 June 2017, jamesriver.church/blog/where-is-god-when-you-are-suffering



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