

Sunday 26th September 2021 – Romans 13:8-12 ‘The Rule of Love’

Debt is a feature of modern life. On one level, it has always been so – but in today’s world, it has reached a new level of significance in our lives. The average household debt in the UK is thousands of pounds, serviced by low interest rates and willing lenders. It is well documented that the pandemic has increased our national debt by more than £300 billion – it now stands at £2 trillion, or nearly £30,000 for each person currently living in the UK. Just take a moment to let that sink in...

And of course, for many years the global narrative has included the enormous debts that many developing nations owe to the West. Perhaps some of you supported the Jubilee 2000 campaign all those years ago, with its slogan ‘Drop the debt’.

And the idea of debt plays an unexpectedly important part in our theology. The words of the Lord’s Prayer as Matthew records them are: ‘Forgive us our *debts*, as we have forgiven our *debtors*.’ Most of us nowadays use Luke’s version which refers to ‘sins’ in a more general sense, and so perhaps miss the force of what Jesus appears to be saying. In fact, even Luke’s version could translate the second part of this line ‘those who are *indebted* to us.’

So debt is both an unwelcome part of the human condition, also a fundamental way we define our relationships to other people. But here in today’s passage, St. Paul puts an unexpected twist on the all-pervasive power of debt in our world. On one level, he makes it clear that debts are to be paid – ‘Let no debt remain outstanding’ – however, he also talks about another type of debt, a positive one: ‘Let no debt remain outstanding, except the debt to love one another.’

As Christians, therefore, however frugally we live, **there is one debt we cannot avoid, indeed we should expect to have, and that is the debt to love each other.** Why? Because at the heart of what governs all our relationships is love defined as selfless service, something which (as we saw last week) ultimately seeks the good of others. As Paul clarifies in this passage, all the main commandments rest on the idea of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

He concludes with this helpful summary: ‘Love does no harm to its neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.’ (v10)

Both last week and this week are really all about how we put love into practice. Last week, we defined love as seeking the good of others. This week, we put a slightly different gloss on the idea of love by focusing on the idea that **love does no harm to others.**

And this is a helpful dimension when it comes to our major focus for this season, which is the environment, and how we care for our world. Perhaps even *before* we seek to do good, we should make sure we are doing no harm. In particular, we in the West have to look at our lifestyles and ask if the way we live is causing harm to other people around the world.

And it’s not just the obvious things Paul refers to in the text – killing, stealing and coveting – it’s the impact of waste, of destructive industries which exist to fuel our consumer products, of pollution which causes illness and even changes weather systems. There’s some evidence now that the air pollution caused by Western industry in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the climatic conditions which caused the terrible drought in Ethiopia in 1984.

We have only one world, and increasingly we are now aware that what happens in one part of the world affects life elsewhere. The world is not just one unlimited biosphere which can absorb whatever we throw at it.

And so we go back to these ancient words which contain one very simple golden rule – ‘Love does no harm to its neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilment of the law’ – and we find there **a blueprint for a different way of life.**

But the choices to make that happen will be hard. We will have to consume less and pay more for it; we will have to use things till they wear out rather than upgrade them every year or two; we will have to stop subsidising industries which cause massive environmental damage, so that we pay their true cost, or stop using them. And the reality is that if we do these things soon, we will avoid a far higher toll in 20 or 30 years time.

St Paul finishes this short passage with a reminder that Jesus is coming soon – and his advice is equally candid: ‘Wake up!’ Live as if Jesus’ return is true.

I think **we could equally apply that same message to our planet. The hour has come to wake up from our slumber.** It’s time to change, and live for the good of the planet, and especially to do no further harm to our global neighbours. This Harvest time of course we want to do what we usually do: give thanks for our good world, for our food and for those who help to grow and process it, and above all to give glory to God for all that we enjoy.

But today let’s also recommit to another type of harvest: a harvest of love, of seeking the good of others, of showing our gratitude by refusing to live in ways that harm our neighbours. Let’s be thankful not just by what we say, or what we pray, but by what we *do*, too. Amen.