

Romans 13:8-14.

I imagine most of us have some experience of having debts. For some people it is a very temporary thing. For example, I currently owe money on my credit card, but the payment isn't due yet, so that's a harmless debt, which will be cleared. Those of us who remember my son Jono's visit last year will have heard of how he is working through Christians Against Poverty with families where financial debt has become overwhelming. He now has some great stories about people becoming debt free as a result of the work that he and his team have been doing.

A sermon is not a place to delve into your finances, so don't worry, but we can have a sense of a debt to others in different ways, too. In some ways, that is where we have got to in Paul's letter to the Romans, which we have visited a few times over the last few weeks. Having explained his understanding of how through Jesus we can find forgiveness, new life and new freedom, he then unpacks more of what life in this new world might be like in the second half of his letter.

The Church of England lectionary - our schedule of Bible readings - misses out the first part of chapter 13, which talks about the state, taxes, etc, but the verse just before our passage is important.

**<sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.**

One of the books I was reading comments that these are what we might call *public* debts and obligations. Now he moves on to relationships and community in this new world of life in the Spirit, using the idea of *personal* or private debts.

I'd like to focus on verses 8 to 10. Paul does something interesting with the idea of love. As we saw last week, this isn't love which is sentiment, it's the love described in the original language as *agape* - the committed, costly, sacrificial that we find frequently in the New Testament:

- God so loved the world, that he gave... (Jn 3:13) .
- But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8)

And in that opening verse of our passage today, Paul is saying love is freely and willingly given, and yet is also the one obligation we have. Origen, one of the ancient scholars of the church, described love as a debt we discharge every day, yet forever owe.

That made some sense to me the other day. Hearing news about Ava, my grand-daughter, reminded me of the changes in life that having children brought for me and Debbie. Little children need huge amounts of love and attention, which is freely given, but it's also an obligation – and at times jolly hard work! That is the kind of love that Paul is looking for in Christians in the new community that is forming and growing.

Paul says that love fulfils the law at the start and end of this section. In between he quotes some of the commandments – actually 7, 6, 8 & 10. (In fact, in some ancient manuscripts the commandments are in this order). They each cover actions that could have destructive

consequences for relationships, the hurt and lies of adultery, the terrible hate and grief of murder, the selfishness of theft, and the corrosive effect of jealousy all make a sharp contrast to what love ought to look like. Love cannot be expressed in actions that are simply motivated by self-interest at the expense of others.

We get comparisons like this elsewhere in the New Testament, too. When Jesus meets the rich young man, he quotes commandments 5-9 and there are other examples too. But what a lot of people miss is that what follows here - "Love you neighbour as yourself" isn't new. I once asked my class at York School of Ministry where it came from, and no-one came up with the correct answer! It comes from the book of Leviticus 19:18 – at the heart of all the rules and regulations of the Jewish people. In a real sense, the commandments – and all the Jewish laws – are an attempt to spell out what the principle might look like. But the essence could get lost in the detail.

For example, I read of a traffic warden ticketing a funeral car while the casket was being loaded. Technically they were correct. But surely no-one who wrote the rules ever intended them to be applied in that way. They had lost all sight of the spirit of the law, which was to prevent the road becoming congested and blocked by shoppers and casual visitors. There was no intention to penalise funerals.

And that is the balance Paul is working at here. Life is not a free-for all; we cannot just do what we want. He doesn't want to discard his heritage, but something new is here. Commandments show us what faith might look like when it is worked out in practise, but if we fully understand the only one that really matters in terms of relationships and community – then everything else will follow.

Love – agape - the costly love of Jesus changes everything. It demands that we see every person as truly and fully human – from the Queen to the refugee in a rubber boat. It expects us to see all people as equal, whatever the colour of their skin. It requires us to regard all people as children of God with all the potential that suggests, however annoying they are. It doesn't require us agree with them, or condone their actions and words, or even *like* them, but it cannot accommodate us wishing them harm.

Love does no wrong to a neighbour, says Paul. When Jesus was asked who his neighbour was, he told a story about a Samaritan, a people his listeners may have despised, and would certainly have felt were inferior – morally and spiritually. They would even refuse to use cups that had previously been used by a Samaritan. But Jesus makes a Samaritan a true neighbour.

Love does no wrong to a neighbour, says Paul; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. And that quality of love is what God is looking for in the life of his people, and in the way they reach out and connect with His world.

Amen.