

Romans 13, 8-end ; Matthew 18, 15-20

Today I'd like us to focus on the reading from Romans, in particular "loving our neighbour" and "now is the moment to wake up". Paul reminds us that loving our neighbour as ourselves is fulfilling the law – it's a right way to live. But, I wonder whether loving our neighbour as ourselves is quite that straightforward. Note it's **as** ourselves not more than ourselves. The problem is I think that we sometimes have difficulty in loving ourselves.

There is a makeover programme that I like on Netflix called Queer Eye. There is a team of 5 men who look at every aspect of someone's life – an interior designer, a nutritionist, a stylist, a hairdresser and a life coach. An episode that really struck a chord with me was a makeover for a gay pastor called Noah. He was dogged with guilt about the length of time it had taken him to come out. He felt that he had tried to be someone he was not, he thought that his reluctance to be honest was not a good role model for others. This guilt about his past was inhibiting his ability to thrive and to grow his new church. He loved his congregation and his community far more than he loved himself.

Certainly, Noah fulfilled the law but he was not flourishing, which I believe is something God wants for us all. So our question this morning is do we love ourselves in a way that we can flourish as a child of God, are we the person we were created to be, the person God wants us to be?

Paul says "you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." Today is the day for action, not tomorrow or next week, but today. Our days are numbered and are precious. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians he said "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Wake up – be ready. We should spend each day wisely because we are called to be Kingdom people.

Let's just go back to Noah, the gay pastor. Each day he carried the burden of the past was another day when he did not live life to the full but it was also a day when he didn't shine as a light for Christ as brightly as he could. What helped him to change was when other church leaders shared their stories about coming out. It hadn't been easy for any of them. They asked him what he would say to a member of his congregation who had similar feelings of guilt about something they had done or had failed to do in the past. Well of course he said he would tell them the past was over and it should not sit on their shoulder casting a shadow over their life, their future. Why they asked was the same not true for him. Even when we know God has forgiven us we sometimes find it hard to forgive ourselves. God can be trusted – when we are forgiven we are forgiven, we do not need to go on living with that burden. Jesus died to take those burdens from us. If we have repented - it's done. Tomorrow is a new day.

But you see the devil does not want us to believe that. Paul's letters talk often in terms of putting on the armour of Christ, or in this reading we have the armour of light. Paul uses the

idea of armour to explain that we need protection from the devil. We don't often speak of being under attack from the devil – but we quite definitely are. Doubts about our faith, doubts about the way we live, doubts about the past, doubts about whether we are forgiven, then as well as doubts there are all those little temptations. The closer we draw to Jesus the more the devil will try to come between us and God. We need to know that we live in a battlefield and we must therefore put on the armour of light.

Paul exhorts us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”. We need to clothe ourselves with the very character of Jesus, or as Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians “ be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” We can love ourselves because we know that we are loved, we are chosen, we are forgiven, we are brothers and sisters – part of God's family, co-heirs with Christ. Remember God loves no one more than he loves you.

If we do not love ourselves we cannot shine brightly as a light for Christ and we will struggle to flourish in the way that God wants us to. My question therefore is can we make today the day we wake up, ditch the doubts, the fear, the past that holds us back so that we can love our neighbour AS ourselves? Amen