

St Mary's Dorchester, Sunday 25th October 2026 i.e. Last Sunday after Trinity (Proper 25).

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of my regular duties as a chaplain is hosting a monthly drop-in with a colleague of mine, Lynn. Lynn is what the hospital calls a “Freedom to Speak Up Guardian”. She helps people who want to blow the whistle on malpractice within the NHS, but she often ends up addressing problems in the Trust that often have no simple solution. She’s a bit like a chaplain in that respect. Anyway, Lynn and I sit down together once a month. And sometimes staff join us to talk through their issues. Sometimes nobody comes, in which case Lynn and I talk about the books we’re reading this month, and anything we’ve been watching on the telly.

Recently in one of those lulls Lynn was telling me about a TED talk she’d listened to. Unlike most of the media we talk about, this was actually relevant to why we were there. The title of the talk is, “When rudeness in teams turns deadly”. The speaker was describing the effect of incivility, or rudeness, in a medical context; but the point applies across the board. It may not surprise you to learn that people do their jobs a lot less well when someone has just been rude to them. What may surprise you is that the effect is measurable and has actually been measured: victims of rudeness suffer a sixty-one percent reduction in cognitive ability. We’re not even talking about verbal abuse or physical violence: this is just the effect of casual disagreeableness – impatience, insensitivity, a lack of care. And you don’t even have to be the victim to suffer ill effects: those who witness someone being rude suffer a twenty percent reduction in performance; and those witnesses will also be fifty percent less likely to help the next victim of rudeness they encounter. Inspired by the growing body of evidence about rudeness a new organisation is trying to effect a cultural change, especially in medical settings; it’s called “Civility Saves Lives” [<https://www.civilitysaveslives.com/>].

“Civility saves lives.” As I say, the message ought not to surprise us. One reason why the message should not surprise us is that our culture has been profoundly shaped by the Jewish and Christian tradition which Jesus so pithily summarises in our Gospel reading today. This is a culture which explicitly values love, and which therefore explicitly condemns all sorts of negative behaviour, of which rudeness is only the tip of the iceberg. We are already well-primed to see rudeness as a bad thing.

Each of our readings today echoes the point in different ways. In Leviticus chapter nineteen Moses delivers his equivalent of a TED talk on good neighbourliness. He says,

you shall not go around as a slanderer among your people... You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin... You shall not ... bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself... [Lev. 19:16, 17-18]

Interestingly these commands about good neighbourliness are listed alongside others about keeping the Sabbath, and offering sacrifices[19:3; 5-8]; about not practising witchcraft, or eating blood [19:26]. All of these are what we call “ritual laws”, which some Christians have distinguished from “ethical laws”. What this chapter of Leviticus teaches us is that the Bible does not distinguish between ritual and ethics: everything we do is ethics; everything we do is religion. There’s no indication in this text that casual disagreeableness is any less serious than idolatry. That should give us all pause for thought.

Saint Paul was known to be occasionally hot-headed, and to fall out with people. He does however seem to have really got along well with the church in Thessalonika, and this passage is expression of his best intentions in ministry.

we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others... But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. [1 Thessalonians 2:5-8]

This sounds to me like good pastoral care: gentleness; a lack of self-interest; compassion. It’s hard to reconcile any of these things with rudeness, whether casual or intentional.

Rudeness goes against the grain. I do however have a few reservations about all of this. Firstly, and most obviously: “Be nice to each other” is a pretty lukewarm paraphrase of the second of the two Great Commandments. Loving your neighbour is about so much more than simply not being rude to them. Many of you will know that my favourite definition of love is one used by Thomas Aquinas. Saint Thomas says that if you love someone you want what’s best for them; you also want to be with them. “Not being rude to someone” barely scratches the surface of what love can be. Still, it would

be a step in the right direction – and that’s a step that most of us dramatically fail to take on a daily basis.

I have a second, deeper, reservation about civility as an ethical principle. What does a culture of civility leave us in situations of conflict? On its own, I don’t think it gets us very far. Our tradition contains lots of good examples of times when people have had to choose between civility on the one hand and truth and justice on the other. Reading through Matthew’s Gospel this summer we have heard Jesus’ take on conflict in Christian communities: in one place he says that we should be challenging one another when we see something that isn’t right [Proper 18]; we should also be forgiving one another [Proper 19]. And notice that today in amongst all this stuff in Leviticus nineteen about politeness Moses also says

you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. [Lev. 19:17]

In other words, as well as being as polite as we can, we also have a responsibility to speak difficult truths – and presumably, to listen to them. This is borne out by the stories of almost every biblical character and every saint worth talking about: people who sometimes learned the hard way that there is no alternative to us challenging each other to be better, to do better. This is a long way from empty agreeableness: it is principled and disciplined, and it knows where to draw the line.

My third reservation about civility is that, however we interpret the command to love your neighbour, that is only one of the two Great Commandments. The other of course is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” [Matthew 22:37] And Jesus says this is the first and greatest commandment. He has already given us a sense of what this means: in last week’s Gospel Jesus talked about “[giving] to God the things that are God’s” [Matthew 22:21]; and you get the sense that doing that often means behaving in ways that the rest of the world considers eccentric, if not downright offensive. A culture of civility – unqualified by any other virtues – ends up being another way to shut down disagreement, to preserve the *status quo*. God, however, will never quite fit into our *status quo*; and no-one who truly loves God will be content with the mere appearance of peace.

I have a strong conviction that these two commands are not really in tension with one another. Whoever I am, loving God and giving God his due will be my greatest good; for you to do the same will be your greatest good; and when we are both found fulfilling that commandment, we will be

finally, perfectly united in the way God created us to be. Human lives and histories throw up all sorts of potential barriers to that vision, but none of those barriers can withstand God's grace in the end.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.