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Loving My Neighbour

A Lenten journey

Edited by Olivia Warburton

BRF Lent Book

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‘A profoundly intelligent, challenging and ultimately hopeful book that roots the complexity of love in raw reality and our common humanity and demonstrates how God’s love shines through and permeates our vulnerability as well as our capacity to forgive and to embrace the “other”. This is a deeply moving read that takes us through the wilderness to the cross and beyond and at times left me breathless with wonder.’

Kate Nicholas, author of *Sea Changed*, *Soul’s Scribe* and *To the Ocean Floor*

‘How can we love wisely? These lively, attractive and perceptive reflections on key biblical texts by some of our most experienced spiritual guides give a range of good answers to that fundamental question. If you live Lent accompanied by these mentors you will find both inspiration and practical wisdom.’

**David F. Ford OBE, Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus,
University of Cambridge**

‘Historically, Lent is one of the church’s seasons of fasting. So, it’s something of a paradox, albeit a pleasurable one, to experience such a rich feast contained within *Loving My Neighbour: A Lenten journey*. This is not to say that the book lacks significant challenge in the disciplines of Lent and the way in which we follow Jesus in the wilderness and through Holy Week towards the cross. The authors offer distinctive contributions, drawing on their particular backgrounds, as they lead us on this journey of Loving My Neighbour. As one author points out early on, “The word ‘love’ is a blunt instrument in the English language,” but what we encounter in the pages that follow is an incisive treatment of this all too familiar, but vital aspect of our discipleship.’

**Revd Canon Geoffrey Colmer, Baptist minister and former president
of the Baptist Union**

‘Loving couldn’t be simpler... and yet couldn’t be more complicated or demanding. This book lays a rich table and simply invites you to come and eat together with each other and with our Lord. Love neither ducks the challenge nor delegates to experts. Love engages, serves, transforms and doesn’t give up. As you hold this book, you hold an invitation to rest awhile and grow a lot. Enjoy.’

Mark Tanner, Bishop of Chester

‘There is little doubt that the chapters in this book will provide readers with all the spiritual and emotional sustenance they need during the important season of Lent. I believe there is truly something for everyone in these seven chapters, especially for those who are experiencing the challenges often associated with the Lenten period, and in need of the blessings and breakthroughs of Easter Sunday. The writers, who are some of the keenest minds connected to the British churches, do not shy away from exploring the hard, uncomfortable questions that Christians often find themselves asking, but to which they invariably struggle to find answers. Equally, they directly address those issues we all face on life’s journey, and provide readers with honest, grounded responses that are scripture based. Moreover, while the different chapters explore important, topical matters, they do so in ways that create a tangible synergy and coherence throughout the book. While we do not often associate Lent with enjoyment, readers will definitely gain a sense of joy, much food for thought and a real blessing from the chapters of *Loving My Neighbour: A Lenten journey*.’

Richard Reddie, Director of Justice and Inclusion, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

Loving My Neighbour

A Lenten journey

Inderjit Bhogal, Joanna Collicutt,
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Gemma Simmonds and John Swinton

Edited by Olivia Warburton



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Contents

List of Bible translations	6
Introduction	7
Week 1 Loving in truth.....	9
<i>Sanjee Perera</i>	
Week 2 Loving those who are vulnerable.....	25
<i>John Swinton</i>	
Week 3 Loving those who are suffering.....	49
<i>Esther Kuku</i>	
Week 4 Loving oneself.....	73
<i>Gemma Simmonds</i>	
Week 5 Loving those who are different	101
<i>Inderjit Bhogal</i>	
Week 6 Loving the world around us	129
<i>David Gregory</i>	
Holy Week Loving to the end.....	155
<i>Joanna Collicutt</i>	
Notes.....	185
Index of Bible readings	186

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.*



Thursday

The debts of justice

Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'

The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.'

GENESIS 4:9–12 (NIV)

As we take up the disciplines of Lent, whether it is fasting, giving something up or taking something on, we each in our own way enter a tradition that has been practised for many centuries. But what exactly is the point of Lent? Why did Jesus enter the wilderness? Was he expecting to be challenged by the devil? Was he undecided about how to accomplish the salvation of the world? Was he weighing up his choices? And what exactly is our Lenten practice trying to achieve?

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness was a catalyst event. Jesus wasn't simply retreating from the crowds to rest; he was expelled into the wilderness. In Mark's account, 'the Spirit sent him out' (Mark 1:12). The Greek verb Mark uses here is *ekballo*, which means to drive or force out, and it is the same word used in the Greek version of Genesis 3:24, when Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden.

Adam and Eve were driven out from Eden because their desire and disobedience contaminated the perfect *shalom* of Eden, and the consequence of sin was death. Their action was the first injustice. What may

seem a simple childish act of curiosity, entrapment or naive caprice was clearly a far more primal and significant violation.

We don't often think of the eating of the forbidden fruit as an injustice, but it defiled all of creation and threatened worse. The deceiver, who was the master of half-truths, had convinced us from the beginning that the cost of sin couldn't possibly be death, persuading us that it was a mere whim of God holding humanity back from its true potential, rather than a great danger we posed to ourselves and the world.

The significance of this injustice remains theologically woolly, as if even now we don't want to acknowledge its apocalyptic consequence, and the real significance of the forbidden fruit remains an awkward mystery to the average Christian. Nevertheless, Genesis narrates the angst of heaven: 'And the Lord God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever"' (Genesis 3:22). In his letter to the Romans theologising this violation of Eden, Paul claims: 'Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned' (Romans 5:12).

The perfect creation that the divine Logos had uttered into being was shattered by the desire and entitlement of this newborn sapience. And these fledgling creatures spread injustice on the earth. The consequences of injustice, the blood of the violated, cried out to the creator from the ground (Genesis 4:10). Expelling Adam and Eve from Eden didn't heal creation; only *the Word*, the Logos which uttered creation into being, could save it.

Theologians suggest that the wilderness is the moment that the nature of the Trinity is revealed and we fully understand the submission and obedience of the Son and the nature of his victory over sin. This God of justice had pursued us from Eden to Bethlehem, calling, cautioning, cajoling and commanding humanity to 'Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the

case of the widow' (Isaiah 1:17) to no avail. As humanity limps on, captive in the corruption conceived in Eden, the Word empties himself into a maiden's womb and is made man, captive in the folds of humanity. In the wilderness, Christ is faced with a choice between forcing holiness, justice and righteousness and loving us in truth.

And loving in truth required profound humility that stripped God to the bone. The divine Word chose to be stripped and emptied of all but love. When the adversary said, 'You are hungry; use your power to command this stone into bread, to turn mass and matter according to your divine desire,' the Word instead considered what might sustain humanity. 'Man shall not live on bread alone,' he said (see Matthew 4:1-4), and he bled out in a perfect sacrifice, so that we might eat and drink of it and be nourished to reclaim eternity.

The primal and primitive truth of love was that it couldn't be commanded, regulated or strategised; it had to be risked. And in that risk was justice, a justice that quenched the sin which had corrupted all that humankind had touched. In the desolation of the wilderness, love kindled a wildfire that spilled over to Golgotha. And as sin begot sin, love begets love. Paul goes on in his letter to the Romans to say:

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

ROMANS 5:17

This was the grail that humanity had sought since we were expelled from Eden, a love that begot love and spread like wildfire, in a storm of perfect justice. Paul proclaims this cost of perfect justice in the truth of love: 'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law' (Romans 13:8).

Prayer

*Christ, who repaid our debts that howled injustice to the heavens,
help us love one another in perfect sacrifice.*

*Bear in us the fruits of that inviolable love
that offers stars to the grasp of darkness,
and let our truth fulfil this law of love.*

Amen.



Friday

Luminaries in the darkness

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

GALATIANS 6:1-3 (NIV)

At the threshold of Lent, as we enter the arid wilderness of self-examination, we consider a Bible verse that is awkward and often misinterpreted in self-righteous defensiveness. But Lent is a time to grapple with the nettles of our lives. Was Paul suggesting we police and regulate our fellow Christians? How do we 'restore' someone? And what are we deceiving ourselves about being?

To understand this, we must probe the reason Paul was writing to the church in Galatia. The churches in Galatia included both Jewish Christians and Gentile converts, and Paul's purpose was to affirm them in their faith and to respond to the theological crisis that was growing in the region, as 'Judaisers', a group of legalistic believers, promoted 'justification by works'. Judaisers were people (both ethnic Jews and Gentiles) who continued to require adherence to Jewish customs and laws, despite Christ's saving sacrifice. They typically sought to persuade Christians to embrace Jewish customs and laws, such as circumcision, believing that this was necessary to be saved.

When Paul heard that this heresy was being taught in the Galatian church, he wrote this letter to affirm justification by faith alone,

emphasising our liberty and salvation bought by the blood of the lamb. He writes in Galatians 5:14: ‘The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”’ In his letter to the Romans, the longest and most systematic treatise of Pauline theology, he proclaims the perfection of God’s righteousness that saves all who believe, declaring that it is only the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, developing the basis of much Christian doctrine.

If, then, we are not bound by Jewish laws and customs, what is sin? When Jesus is asked by a teacher of the law what the most important commandment is, he replies:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.’

MARK 12:30-31

And yet Jesus is clear in Matthew 5:17, ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.’ And in Matthew 7:12 he says, ‘In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.’

We had lost our way in the arid wilderness beyond Eden. Adam and Eve, who had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, had learnt the difference between good and evil. And humanity’s lofty inheritance, instead of bearing out love, had mostly been weaponised. The law that was meant to regulate the harm this knowledge might inflict had become a way to marginalise, exclude and oppress. Those chosen by love to love, those set apart to be the light of the world, the luminary of creation, instead of radiating the warmth and grace of love, true to the nature of our divine image, had sought to consume the light and capitalise its power. This knowledge, which should have liberated us,

had been commodified and corrupted, and the temple courts of love had become a marketplace.

If we think this knowledge, this law that we had so industriously codified, and incorporated, ratified and built Babel towers from, is love, is the perfect joy we were created for, we deceive ourselves. If we imagine that gently restoring each other from the destitution of sin looks like admonishment, policing or censure, we deceive ourselves. Instead, we are called to 'spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday' (Isaiah 58:10).

At the threshold of Lent, we are called to consider the cost of love, and in mirroring Christ's sacrifice, we are called to gently restore those around us, not by censure, but by carrying their burdens for them, by spending ourselves on behalf of the hungry and responding to the needs of the destitute, the oppressed and the marginalised. This is the truth of love. The law and the human endeavours of moralism, which should have liberated humanity instead of imprisoning them, failed due to its corruptions and was barren of love. We are called to restore the world around us, as the salt of the earth, the light of the world and the luminaries of love.

Prayer

*Christ our Saviour, who emptied yourself
into the crush of hayseed and star dust
in an eternal abundance of love,
extinguish our petty censures and our desire
to belittle, regulate and police others,
and teach us to be luminaries of love.
Help us comfort those who have burnt out
and grown weary of glowing,
and help us restore light to the darkness.
Amen.*

Saturday

Living out love

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

ROMANS 12:9-16 (NIV)

'We have just enough religion to make us hate,' Jonathan Swift once observed, 'but not enough to make us love one another.' To truly grasp the depth and width of the love that Paul is advocating in this epistle to the Romans, we have to go back to the gospels.

Matthew's gospel commands us: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). John's gospel, popularly called the gospel of love, rooted and grounded in love, records the concept more than 50 times, and proclaims the command of love directly from Jesus' lips over and over: 'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also must love one another' (John 13:34).

This command of love that was in the DNA of Jewish scripture came at a significant point in history, when the rise and fall of empires had made trade and consumerism more efficient. Two millennia later,

in a progressively rationalised social world based on impersonal formal relationships, love of the other beyond family, kinship, reciprocity or contract has increasingly become an alien concept. Technological knowledge has built a fortress of self-sufficiency around us, and consumerism has cocooned us in comforts.

The ancient world had bound *love* to virtue ethics and obligation, and the fabric of society depended on this love of the other. It was more than just a nebulous honour code. Caring for the stranger is mentioned more than 36 times in the Torah, more than any other commandment. Similarly, in the Greco-Roman world, hospitality was a divine right of the guest and a divine duty of the host, both a public duty and a private virtue. Many other historic cultures had similar doctrines of love, and in many cultures in the global south we see this distinction to this day.

But in the modern west, where self-love has created a paradigm shift from collectivism to individualism, the word love continues to be eroded, as we abandon our consciousness of corporate destiny. Patriotism, the notion of brotherly love or the unity of a community which was once about generosity and loving the other, is increasingly being translated into who we exclude. *Philadelphia*, the love of societal kinship and community, has been replaced by insularity and xenophobia, heavily invested in materialism and capitalism.

The truth and abundance of this concept of love that Paul extols in Romans is almost beyond our comprehension. The depths of a selfless love, a devotion that honours the other above ourselves, seem counterintuitive to our culture and even our survivalist biological imperatives woven into our fallen nature. The nature of Christian faith too has changed as our emphasis on personal faith has overwhelmed our corporate identity in Christ and our collective worship, bound together in the communion of saints.

So how do we grasp and live out this ineffable love, that blinds us in its sublime incandescent light? How do we practise this grace that seems beyond human capacity? The Word, that divine utterance that

created the cosmos, didn't just send us a reasoned logical commandment tabulated in stone. The Word came to us and was enfleshed and lived out love. John's first epistle transforms duty into delight: 'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19). And it's a generative and infectious grace that spreads through the world. We cannot reason our way into this command, we can only live our way into it. It is beyond rationality or even intuition, but can only be lived out in prayer, Bible study, self-awareness, and generous and faithful action.

This Lent, as we dwell in the in-between of the temptations of wilderness and the garden of Gethsemane, we are assured of the redemption of grace and the solace of the Comforter. This is the profound truth of love. We are called to serve in love, to be awake to love and to watch and wait in love.

Prayer

*Solace and Comforter, who sees the brokenness of our failures,
dwell amid us as we come together in the name of love,
bringing light into this fallen darkness as we stumble in sin.*

*Spirit that blows where you will,
set ablaze our hearts.*

*Be the light in our lanterns and beacons, our fireworks and flames,
and feed a world starved of love.*

Amen.



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