

An Important Question : Who Is My Neighbour?

What, I ask, is the essence of Christianity? Of Christian living? You would answer, surely, that it consists in obedience to the two great Commandments; that, in other words, he is a Christian who loves the Lord with all his heart and soul and strength and mind, and who loves his neighbour as himself. Christianity is unquestionably a religion of love. "A new commandment" the Lord said, "I give unto you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another." (John 13: 34-35)

Inspiring and challenging as that teaching is, it is not, however, without its difficulties. We cannot, for a start, love our neighbour unless we know who that neighbour is. Are we to think in terms of all people, or only a few? Does it apply to people we don't know as well as to those we do? What of the wrong-doers and the people we feel would take advantage of us? Are they our neighbour? In fact, might we not not ask the question, along with that lawyer who enquired of the Lord about it. Who is my neighbour?

The Lord's answer was by way of telling a parable, as it happens one of the best known of them all, though the point He was making has mostly been missed and continues to be even today. It is the parable of the Good Samaritan, and you probably know it well. To make His point Jesus told the story of a traveller from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among thieves which, He said, "stripped him of his clothes, and wounded him and departed, leaving him half dead." The interesting thing was the reaction of others who passed along that road afterwards, first a priest and then a Levite, both of whom did nothing, and then a Samaritan who "had compassion" on the wounded man "and went to him" and took care of him. "Which now of these three", Jesus asked, "was neighbour unto him that fell among thieves?" And the lawyer answered "He that showed mercy on him". The question had been asked, you remember, "Who is my neighbour?" And in reply the Lord directed attention not to the wounded man but to the Samaritan - to the man who did good - for in reality, and in an abstract sense, it is the goodness in a person - such as He showed - which is the neighbour to be loved. Though, as I say, this point is invariably missed, yet it is unmistakably there. And it introduces us to a whole new concept of what is involved by loving one's neighbour in terms of people. In fact it is that which is within people which is the neighbour we are commanded to love.

"To love the neighbour" wrote Swedenborg, "is not to love his person, but that which is with him and from which he is, thus good and truth". (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 106). And, elsewhere, "At this day who knows what the neighbour is? It is every single person with a difference according to the quality and quantity of the good which is with them; thus good itself." (*Arcana Caelestia* 3419-3). To love the neighbour therefore is to love what is good in another and what is judged to be good for that other. It is not to render blind and indiscriminate aid to all and sundry, but to seek out and to do those things which we believe to be in another's best and long-term interests. Mistakenly, and, as we read, "it is believed by many that love towards the neighbour is to give to the poor, to render aid to the body, and to do good to everyone but charity is to act prudently, and for the sake of the end, that good may result." (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 100). Good is essentially the neighbour. (see *True Christian Religion* 410).

Astoundingly comprehensive though it may at first sound, yet it is true to say that to look to what is good and to work towards what is good is to love one's neighbour or to practice charity. Wherever good is sincerely being sought there you have charity. And this may involve correction and punishment, and also denial and refusal, if these are judged to be in the real interests of another. "Thus" wrote Swedenborg, "a judge loves his neighbour when, in accordance with law and justice, he punishes an evil-doer; for in this way he provides for his amendment, and also consults the welfare of the citizens, by preventing the infliction of further harm upon them. Every one knows that a father who chastises his children when they do wrong, still loves them. On the other hand, if he does not chastise them, he shows a love for their faults; and such cannot be in accordance with charity". (*True Christian Religion* 407). The love of the neighbour is not something which is exercised towards just a few people such as those whom we know and like. It is to be exercised towards everyone, even though the way in which it operates will vary considerably. It is the good in another which matters and which we are to love and foster. I repeat the point, good is the neighbour, and it is this good we are to love.

If we are to truly love our neighbour, therefore, we must exercise judgment and discretion, not meekly giving into requests or by our actions postponing the need which another may have to face up to the reality of the situation in which he finds himself. If we would love our neighbour we may be called upon to criticise or speak harshly, and to point out the faults which another has.

Sympathise with a person, as we may do, yet it might be necessary to refuse requests for our time or our help or whatever, if we judge it best of him that he should not have these things. It is not uncommon for Christians to feel remorse and to have a conscience about not giving anything that is asked of them by others, as if they should do. But there is no need for this. Charity is not philanthropy. Love of the neighbour is not a matter of 'doing good' in the way this is popularly understood. Our real concern should be for what is good. Here is where our efforts should focus.

The neighbour is not only to be thought of in terms of another. It can be also thought of collectively, the larger neighbour. There are, as Swedenborg points out, degrees of the neighbour. The community, for example, is the neighbour in a wider sense than a single individual is. And the country in which we live is the neighbour in a wider sense still. How best, you may ask, does one serve one's neighbour in this collective sense of the term? In what way do I best serve the interests of my community and of my country?

The ways are of course numerous, but the most important of them all is the job or employment in which we find ourselves. If we do that well we do more for the common good than in any other way. What really matters, when it comes to it, is not one's energetic support of every movement in our area, an exhausting round of community activities, or subscriptions to numerous charities, important though these are, but that in our day to day work and affairs we avoid fraud and hypocrisy, misrepresentation and deceit, stolen time and poor workmanship. "Christian charity" we read, "exists with everyone as he does his work faithfully; for thus, if he shuns evils as sins, he does goods daily, and is himself his own use in the common body." (*Doctrine of Life* 114). And yet again, "Charity is all the work of his calling which a man does from the Lord; he does it from the Lord when he shuns evils as sins." (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 253).

Startling as it at first sounds, I can love my neighbour even when I do not like him. Indeed I do not have to like him. For the truth is, as I have been stressing, that the neighbour is the good in another and even though we have no common ground with that other and may feel aversion to him yet we can still love that good. We can still by our actions towards him and the things we say to him try to keep before us what is good and in his interests. "We are" as was once said on this subject, "enjoined to love the neighbour, but if our idea of the neighbour is simply that of a person living next to us, we may find it difficult to do so.

He may exhibit anything but lovable qualities and be unresponsive to neighbourly approaches. But when we realise that the real neighbour to be loved is not so much the person as the good in the person, or what is the same thing, what is of God in the person, our difficulty vanishes. To love an evilly-disposed, cantankerous, spiteful, ungracious individual is to ally ourselves with the evils which dominate him, and to encourage him in his bad behaviour. On the other hand, to look for potential goodness beneath an evil exterior, to minister to that goodness and stimulate it, is true neighbourliness. For, whilst neighbourliness certainly dictates common humaneness even to the unthankful and to the evil, and consideration for their succour in times of distress, the long view of neighbourliness is the neighbour's eternal welfare in the sense of character development - not so much his temporary need as his orderly development as a spiritual, immortal being". (Charles Hall in "*Who is My Neighbour?*", page 9).

Without doubt there is a lot of confusion in people's minds about charity, what it is and who are really charitable people and what are really charitable actions. We are being called upon now to revise our thinking and the popular definitions.

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