

The passage we heard a moment ago from Paul's letter to the Romans brings together a good deal of the moral teaching of the Mosaic Law in the single commandment: "Love your neighbour as yourself." It is a commandment that we have all heard many times and to which to some degree we give our assent. It is not, however, something that comes easily or that we often even think about in the course of our everyday life. Ordinarily we are pushed and pulled by motives of various kinds, some positive and others less so. Seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are fundamental to our instinctual life. Beyond that, many of us are naturally ambitious and want to do well; we want to be able to afford a decent way of life for ourselves and our families. Sometimes we are motivated by envy or anger or a desire to get back at others. Often our motives are complex and, in some cases, not even understood by ourselves.

Paul encourages us to approach all aspects of life mindful of the ideal of loving our neighbour as ourselves. In order to make what he is saying a little more concrete, he explains that "Love does no wrong to a neighbour." The prohibitions he mentions - adultery and the infidelity it reflects and deepens, murder and violence, theft in whatever form - these and similar things are all forms of doing harm to others. The fact that the commandments are formulated in the negative - Thou shalt not - reminds us that in order to develop positive and helpful

relations with others, we have to begin by avoiding what is hurtful and destructive.

The love spoken of in the New Testament has many levels of intensity. In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares to his disciples: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” He then adds: “Greater love than this no one has than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus in describing the last judgment puts the emphasis on whether or not we have reached out in concrete and helpful ways to those in need – to the poor and the hungry, the naked and the homeless, the sick and the imprisoned.

In September 1984, Pope John Paul II spent 12 days journeying across Canada from coast to coast, celebrating the Eucharist, speaking to large and small groups, reaching out to children and young people as well as to the poor and the sick and to our native peoples. I have always remembered a particular homily that he gave at the Mass in Moncton, New Brunswick. It was on September 13th, the feast of St John Chrysostom.

Chrysostom was an eloquent preacher and bishop in Constantinople at the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th centuries. He was one of the most

outspoken and challenging of the leaders of the early church in regard to what we call social justice. In spite of the wealth and opulence of Constantinople, a city which then housed the Roman emperor, the disparity between the rich and the poor was extreme.

Chrysostom challenged the wealthy not to cut themselves off from others in a selfish and self-centred life but to share what they had with those who had less. He condemned the love of money as a terrible vice. "It makes people fiercer than wild beasts," he said, "not allowing them to consider conscience, friendship or the salvation of their own soul."

The pope in his homily offered a translation of Chrysostom's concerns into modern terms when he explained that love of neighbour today includes such things as "respect for human dignity and human rights; concern for the less fortunate, for workers, for the unemployed and for immigrants; establishment of social measures for greater equality and justice for all men and women," involvement on behalf of the poor and the oppressed especially in the Third World.

Love is not just interpersonal. It has to do with the manner in which we as peoples and nations, and as the human community organize and structure our

common life. Politicians, bankers, business people, academics, scientists, those in the medical and legal professions, those involved in the media in all its forms – these and, in fact, all of us are called to contribute through our life and our work to the building up of a more humane and just world, a world without violence and war.

Pope Francis has been in Columbia the last few days where his message has been one of forgiveness and reconciliation and of the importance of strengthening efforts to create in that country a more humane and peaceful society. In calling for the Columbians and especially their leaders to maintain the current peace agreement between the government and the rebels, he said: “The more demanding the path, the greater must be our efforts to acknowledge each other, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and to support one another. “

Our culture and our way of life individual and national situations change, but the challenge remains the same - not to harm others but to affirm them and to seek their good. Each of us is called to contribute in whatever way we can to creating what Pope Paul VI called “a civilization of love.”