St Edmundsbury Cathedral

God, neighbour and self all connected
25 October 2026
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

Picture a juggler. A skilful juggler keeping three juggling balls moving in constant motion, the balls spinning round and round. Now imagine that at a planetary scale – three planets spinning around each other, moving constantly. At that scale, gravity becomes a big factor. Those three celestial bodies – the gravity of each one affecting the movement and position of the other two. And it starts to get very complicated. In physics, it's known as the 3 Body Problem. The problem for physicians is calculating and predicting the positions and movements of the 3 bodies when they are constantly interacting with each other and influencing each others' directions. It's not just a theoretical a problem. In the universe there are planets and suns like that. Not for them the predictable orbits of our solar system, planets moving around the sun.

For me, the 3 body problem is a way of picturing the 3 body problem our faith. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all of your mind ... and your neighbour as yourself." 3 bodies: God, neighbour, self. How they interact and affect each other are at the heart of our faith. Our problem is we tend to think of God, neighbour and self as separate bodies. Interacting yes - but most of the time we talk as if God is out there - separate; neighbours, other people over there - separate; and the self, me, in here - separate. The problem is the illusion of separation.

"Though we are many, we are one body ..."

A change of metaphor. Still science, but now some biology. Chances are you've heard of the fungal network - the vast underground system of fungal threads that connect plants and trees. Around 80% to 90% of plant species on land have a partnership with fungi in the soil. It enables nutrient exchange, as well as climate balance. Meanwhile we humans live as if we are unconnected to the rest of creation. The climate crisis has highlighted the mistake of thinking that we are somehow separate. Environmental change highlights the illusion of separation.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is an ecologist and writer. She draws on her indigenous American heritage. When she "starts to feel disconnected from the natural world, she likes to do a breathing exercise. She inhales and thinks about how she is breathing in the breath of plants. And then she exhales, and she thinks about how her breath, in turn, gives plants life." She says "That is a ... way to recognise our reciprocity in the living world; that we are not separate". [1] Jesus put it like this: "I am the vine, you are the branches." Intimate connection. God is the whole of which we are all parts.

"Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread."

The challenge for us Western Christians is we are steeped in what our culture tells us about God, neighbour and self. And our culture is strong on the self, good on neighbour, and poor on God. We absorb how the self as at centre of the universe, supposedly. How it's a good idea to help your neighbours. But you can forget about God. Of course we learn through faith a different set of values,

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/nov/16/weve-become-distrustful-of-each-other-braiding-sweetgrass-author-robin-wall-kimmerer-on-trump-rural-america-and-resistance

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but being a Christian is not straightforward in our culture. So we have much to unlearn and we have much to practice.

The good news is we can learn a different way – we are practising a different way. And it can be as a simple as learning to breathe. When I breathe in, I remember I am breathing the breath of plants. When I breathe out, I remember my breath gives plants life. When I breathe, I am breathing the breath of life - the breath of life from God, as the Genesis story puts it. *Ruah* in the Hebrew. When I start to feel disconnect from God, I can breathe and remember it is impossible to exist separate from God. If you start to feel disconnected from your neighbour, remember you are breathing the same air – a challenging thought in these post-Covid days – but breathing the same air is better than trying to hold your breath for any length of time.

Calm your breathing, and imagine the holy breath of life following through you, uniting all life. It is the Holy Spirit which Jesus breathed on his followers. She flows in with your in-breath, in and around your body, energising you, and out into the world as you breathe out. In this present moment in which you find yourself, you are enveloped and filled by God, and so are the people all around where you are; all the people, all life. [2]

We can let this change the way you see. As you go through the day, at any time and in any place you can draw yourself back to awareness of God's presence simply by focusing on the breath. In God we live and move and have our being. God is closer than the air we breathe. And so we can remember and we can live out that we love the Lord your God with all our heart, soul, and mind. The first and the great commandment. And a second, loving our neighbour as we love ourselves.

[2] Adapted from Wild Goose Chase by Annie Heppenstall

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