

Jesus, my Neighbour and the Croc...

29/10/17

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt 22:36-40)

What does it really mean to love your neighbour?

Is it as simple as ensuring that you don't always fight with your colleagues at work?

Is it as simple as ensuring that you are on good terms with your physical neighbours that you live next door to at home? (I don't always get that right!)

Is it as simple as ensuring that you are on good terms with your fellow brother and sister Christians?

Or was Jesus alluding to a much deeper understanding and commandment in this text that we read together this morning?

In fact, I would be so bold as to suggest that the complete Christian tenet or core philosophy of what Jesus stood for and thus the core of Christianity rests on these powerful words... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. It is thus by default, or automatically applicable then, that if you and I apply this first great commandment to our lives, we are bound to live the second... love your neighbour as yourself...

Powerful words, powerful instructions, powerful implications, powerful consequences, both if we succeed or fail...

As many of you already know, a big part of my ministry is contributing to the holistic formation of young minds in this country. This has always been my calling. To make a difference to the youth, who are admittedly, growing up in challenging times...

About ten years ago I realised that there was a need for the Grade Sevens (Std 5 for those of you who grew up in the previous education dispensation) to have a form of closure and goodbye, as they left the Senior Preparatory phase for High School. I also realised that this might be a very good opportunity for me to facilitate a time for these young teenagers to explore and enjoy nature at its best. Unfortunately, the Millennial Generation (for many complicated reasons) have been locked into social media, X-Box gaming and being kept safe indoors). Gone are the days of adventuring outdoors, joining Scouts or Girl Guides, Military Service and the like. So after a discussion with my Head Master, I decided to give the Grade Sevens the opportunity to go river rafting down the Breede River, near Swellendam, for the weekend.

This is no light undertaking...

Firstly, I am no spring chicken anymore.

Secondly, there are very strict laws nowadays about personal safety and legal rights of children to be protected at all costs.

Thirdly, many children today are no longer exposed to raw nature and thus do not always have the natural skills necessary to cope in an unfamiliar environment.

Lastly, working full time, I realised I needed the assistance of a professional company who were geared to handle this type of event.

My Head Master put me in touch with just such a professional company who specialised in taking children (and adults) river rafting. During those first few planning meetings I soon realised the complexity of taking on such an undertaking; for example, there are regulations around river guides being licensed for specific rivers, medical qualifications, transport, catering and accommodation, to list just a few of the logistics.

The first thing I learnt on my first river trip was that inflatable boat technology had taken a giant leap since my scouting days... the popular inflatable boat used today for novices on the river are called Crocs (nothing to do with the reptile!). Originally, the Croc was designed to enable rafting operators to access waterways where no other boat could go. Since then, it has proved overwhelmingly popular as an indispensable family craft. Its carrying power,

performance and versatility continue to amaze many people. It is even used as a rapid deployment rescue craft by rescue services and police search and rescue.

The Croc has a unique standard closed-cell foam floor that provides rigidity, buoyancy and protection. Its flat profile glides easily over the water and it boasts a rapid self-bailing system for big water ingress...

Many of you are probably thinking to yourself this morning, "Why on earth is this priest batting on about an inflatable water craft in a sermon?"

Very good question!

When I spent time reflecting on how to best explain the concept that Jesus taught us about loving and working with our neighbours, I was immediately reminded of the recent river rafting trip that I did last month with close on thirty teenagers and four river guides...

You see, the Croc is a two-person craft! (Note I didn't say two-man! I am being gender correct... and my experience taught me that often the girls are better at rowing than the boys!)

I realised that there is such a strong analogy in being a good neighbour with surviving a day down the river in a Croc with a fellow rower...

The Croc is designed in such a way that the two crew sit one behind each other, in other words, one crew member sits near the front of the craft and the other near the rear. Both crew members have oars used to row and steer. This is where it becomes interesting...

Firstly, the crew member sitting in front is essentially the power house, or engine of the craft. This person is responsible for doing most of the rowing and keeping the craft moving forward. Sometimes, as Christians, we feel down and a little lost in a demanding and changing world that can exhaust us very quickly if we aren't careful. Just look at the number of people struggling with depression, fatigue and anxiety. Sometimes, just like the front crew member who powers the Croc with their rowing, we as Christians need to lean on each other when we are going through rough times. That is one of the messages that Jesus left for us when He said love your neighbour as yourself. Be that

crew member who sits in the front of the Croc. Be the power, be the strength, be the engine that your friend can lean on or rely upon occasionally. Remember, if you do find yourself sitting in the front of the Croc in your life experience, you don't have to do this alone, you have the Holy Spirit to strengthen and empower you... what better sustainable and green fuel can you get in life than that?

Secondly, the crew member who sits at the back of the Croc is responsible for rowing AND most importantly of all, steering the Croc down the river around the rocks, trees and through the rapids. This takes skill and dedication. You see, the rower in front of the Croc has to TRUST the skipper in the rear to guide the craft through the dangers of the river... the skipper has to trust the front crew member to be the faithful engine at all times...

See the extended metaphor?

Sometimes in life, we are ALL called to lead, uplift, steer, instruct, assist with formation and growth. This is the role of the skipper. As a good neighbour, Jesus also calls us to be that skipper sometimes... this does not mean that you have to be an ordained priest to be a skipper. No! We are all called as Christians, at times, to lead and guide one another and ourselves through the rapidly flowing waters of life.

Thirdly, you can't always choose your crew member! Initially the young teenagers choose their own partners but it soon becomes evident when Crocs start crashing into rocks and doing complete revolutions, that some crew members struggle to work together and to co-ordinate their rowing and steering. This is when the river guides often step in and offer guidance and training on the water. If this still fails, crew members are sometimes swapped out with others who are more adept or skilled. Sometimes in life, when we are really struggling with our neighbour, whoever that may represent, it is okay to seek the advice and help from a priest or a Christian leader who can remediate and assist with the best way forward. Jesus does not expect us to navigate the treacherous waters of life all on our own... just like the river guides interspersed amongst the Crocs on the river, so too, do we have priests, deacons, wardens, mentors and leaders in the church who are able to help us on our journey of life. Use them. God put them there for a reason.

Lastly, I am so reminded of how the river can represent our Christian lives... sometimes the river is gentle and flowing slowly. In the same way, there are times when our lives are going well and peacefully with little or no drama. Yet, very suddenly, I have learnt how the river can change in seconds to a raging torrent, interspersed with rocks and rapids. Now you really need your wits about you! Just like our lives when drama suddenly hits... the death of a loved one, our health deteriorates, we struggle financially and so the list goes on. It is during these times that we need to be already prepared with a strong rower up front, an experienced skipper in the rear and finally, the knowledgeable river guides nearby...

Being a Christian neighbour in the world today is no easy task... it takes perseverance, guts and determination. We need to be able to love and accept all people from all walks of life, culture and religion. This is what being a true neighbour is all about, being prepared and ready to navigate our Crocs down the river of life, with the hand of Jesus guiding us and the power of the Holy Spirit empowering us. If we are to stand out as Christians, full of the love of Christ, if we are to make a positive and constructive difference in the world we live in, if we are to honour the first and second commandment that Jesus left us, then we need to stand up and be counted as a people who respect the qualities of being a solid and good neighbour to one another... no matter the cost... for the cost price has already been paid in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus was that neighbour to everyone He met.

So can you be.

May God bless you in the week ahead as you re-evaluate the meaning of being a Christian neighbour to everyone that you meet in your daily walk with Him.

Amen.