

Who is my neighbour?

That was the question asked of Jesus by a legal expert, to explain one of the great commandments: “love your neighbour as yourself”. What followed was the parable of the good Samaritan, who rescued a half-dead stranger by the roadside.

But is my neighbour just today’s stranger, or does he or she include tomorrow’s - almost a stranger by definition? Two thousand years ago the consequences of today’s actions did not impact so significantly on tomorrow’s outcomes: how different it is now! We are beset by such challenges, whether environmental, medical, political or financial, and all the evidence shows that the present has much higher priority than the future.

Projecting accountability forwards helps to bring things more sharply into focus. For example, a business director who sacrifices future company earnings to boost short-term results during his tenure of office fails its shareholders. A politician who refuses to ratify an environmental treaty in the interest of cheap energy today fails not only his people but quite possibly many others, for example in low-lying island communities. A doctor who pursues a line of research in denial of its long term risks fails humanity. A society which fails to make adequate pension provision places an unreasonable burden of care on the next generation.

Ethics is a comfortably-sounding academic term: it’s really about loving our neighbour of the future as much as we love ourselves to-day. In some respects many secular charities and lobbying groups are far ahead of religious bodies: for example, environmental groups have warned for years of the danger to future generations of pollution and global warming.

Perhaps we draw too literal a meaning from those words in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’: “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself”. This teaching is about dealing with anxiety and stress, not about disregarding our responsibility for the future. When Jesus speaks of building a house on rock rather than sand, He’s focusing on the merits of good forward planning.

So, as loving our neighbour is one of the two great commandments from which ‘hang all the law and the prophets’, perhaps we should be better stewards of that which is entrusted to us to-day, and care more about the next generation, and the world it will inherit.