

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12. 18)

Mr Mayor, Deputy Lieutenant, honoured guests, it is good to see so many here for the inaugural service of our new Devizes town Mayor. We gather here today to affirm and celebrate our Civic life together.

The Mayor is the first citizen of the town. Within the town, he has precedence over all but members of the Royal Family.

Within the constitutional monarchy, which we have here in The UK, a town mayor represents in the town both the authority and responsibility of the crown; and the voice and rights of the people held together in this one office. An office which is one of duty and service as well as of honour and dignity.

In his Civic Role the Mayor meets with individuals and communities to honour them for their contribution to the life of the town, and to promote civic pride. The role of Mayor is distinct from that of his role as Councillor and the Mayor acts in a non-political manner when carrying out this civic role.

The Mayor also chairs meetings of the Full Council so that its business can be carried out efficiently; with regard to the rights of Councillors, and the interests of the whole community.

In this service we pray for our Mayor that God will bless him with the grace and strength needed to fulfil these duties in the building of the common good here in Devizes.

But all of us are gathered here today not just to welcome our new Mayor Councillor Andy Geddes, but to acknowledge our own personal and collective responsibility in promoting a community that “lives peaceably with all” to take that phrase from the first reading we heard today.

This reading came from St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. Rome was the city at the heart of the Roman Empire, a cosmopolitan city, a rich mix of ethnic groups from across the empire, of languages, religions and cultures. In this letter to the new Christian Community in Rome St Paul is giving advice on how all in the community should behave to and with one another if those of different faiths, cultures, political viewpoints, social class, or ethnic backgrounds are to be able to get on together.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.” We do indeed look to a town mayor to take a lead in these things. In your year of office Mr Mayor you will indeed have many opportunities to rejoice with those rejoicing in all kinds of celebrations and fun events that bring joy and happiness to individuals, groups and organisations and to the community as a whole...you will also find yourself weeping with those who weep when you are brought in to be alongside them, to give and share in consolation at times of sorrow, grief or tragedy.

But one thing, at least, that I have discovered about Devizes in my time as Rector here is that this is a town in which community spirit flourishes. This is a town in which joys and sorrows are shared. All of us recognise that we too must do our part to help build this sense of common good for all which enriches all our lives, and with you, Mr Mayor, we commit ourselves to this duty and service today.

And our second Bible reading points us to a remarkable truth about this duty and service – whether for our town, this nation, or the world in which we live and are called to share.

Our mayor, coming from a background in civil service with customs and excise could have chosen a reading from St Matthew’s Gospel. A Gospel written by a former Tax-Collector, instead he has chosen a reading from St Luke’s Gospel, a gospel in which we find the most favourite of parables.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a story so familiar to us.. This is a Bible story that many of us heard in childhood. On the face of it, it is a moral tale that encourages us to help anyone we see in need.

The expert in the law who questions Jesus gives the standard definition from the Hebrew Bible of what is required to gain eternal life -a place in paradise- “To love God and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.”

He no doubt had a great knowledge of the Jewish law and scriptures. He may have had in mind the verse from Prov 21:13 ‘If a man shuts his ear to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered’

In the story that Jesus tells, the Good Samaritan is an example of what loving our neighbour is all about. He didn’t just patch him up on the side of the road, but he put him on his donkey and took him to an inn where he took care of

him. Not only that but he was willing to pay the price by giving two day's wages and then promising to pay for any further expenses when he came back.

Here is a man showing real love to someone in need. He follows through in his commitment by doing whatever it takes. Sometimes we start with good intentions but so often we become half-hearted and fail to complete the work. But here we see someone who really goes "the second mile" - another saying of Jesus – and who shows what caring for others is all about.

"Go and do likewise" is Jesus message at the end, and many of us think and believe that this is what the story is all about; a call for us to help those we see in need. But the story goes so much farther and deeper and, at the time of Jesus, would have been really shocking.

"Which of these three was a neighbour to this man" asks Jesus of the expert in the law

In his reply, the lawyer cannot bear to even say the name 'Samaritan', such was the hatred in which they were held by most Jews of Jesus' day. Instead, he replies, 'the one who showed him mercy'. 'Go and do likewise', Jesus says.

The story was told to answer the question that one who is "our neighbour", is the worst of our enemies. That the one who is seen to be the worst of our enemies can also be the one who is seen as that neighbour who loves us as we are to love ourselves.

If Jesus was telling this story in Jerusalem today he would have chosen not a Samaritan, but a Palestinian as the example of neighbourliness!

Jesus held up the example of a Samaritan a hated ethnic minority as an example of a good neighbour. He was willing to cross political, racial, cultural and social barriers and risk prejudices and the fear of the unknown because he saw someone with a need and he had the resources to meet that need.

As we both receive and give that same neighbourly love across the divisions of our town, society and world we will begin to see that "harmony with one another" in which our lives, and the lives of all, can flourish.

Who is my neighbour? is a question that can be asked either to restrict our sense of responsibility, to narrow down our concerns for those just like ourselves. Or it can be a question that shatters our prejudices and opens up our minds and hearts to recognise that we can find partnerships and neighbourly co-operation with those we would least expect.