

Who is my Neighbour?

“And who is my neighbour?” Joan mused as she was reading from the 10th chapter of St Luke's Gospel. Joan like to sit awhile in the morning and read from her Bible. It had been something she had done for years and it settled her for the day. Today this question, once put to Jesus by a Jewish lawyer two millennia ago, struck home to her.

“Yes, who is my neighbour?” thought Joan, as she gazed out of the window of her second floor flat. “I hardly know anyone here. I don't know who lives below me or above me. I rarely see the people on the same floor as me. They seem to be out all the time. When I go out, I hardly ever bump into anyone from the flats. It's very lonely here.”

She missed Bob, her husband, who had died two years ago. The old bungalow with its large garden had proved too much for her to look after by herself. She thought a flat in the town would be just the thing. It would be easy to look after and she would be able to get to the shops, the post office and the bank by herself. She had been right about this. But she had not realized she would be so lonely.

She thought about the neighbours she and Bob had known. She remembered the street they had lived in when they were first married. They had lived in a little semi in a street of little semis. The neighbours in the adjoining semi kept themselves very much to themselves, but were always very polite when they met. The neighbours on the other side were friendlier, and would ask how they were getting on and were particularly helpful with advice about plants and the garden. Then there was the young couple, the Harrisons, who lived further along the street. Their children and hers used to play together.

She still kept in touch with Mrs Harrison; they exchanged news at Christmas and occasionally at other times. Their children, of course, had grown up long ago, like hers, and had children of their own now. Why had her son gone and settled in Australia and her daughter in the USA? They kept her informed about her grandchildren, but it was not the same as if they were here. They did come over to Britain occasionally and she had visited her daughter in the States the year before Bob died. Her son and daughter kept on to her about getting a computer so they could Skype her, whatever that meant. But she was too old to manage a computer, wasn't she?

Her mind went back to that street again. There was Mrs Wilkins who lived opposite. Her net curtains were always twitching and if anything was happening in the street you could be sure Mrs Wilkins would be there. Bob and she had thought Mrs Wilkins a bit of a nosy parker. But their neighbours, the friendly ones, had told them that Mrs Wilkins had her good points; they told of one occasion when they had been out for the afternoon. Mrs Wilkins had seen smoke coming from their kitchen and called the fire brigade promptly. The gas had been left on under a pan. Fortunately, Mrs Wilkins' prompt action had meant that not much damage had been done. It was, indeed, true: you knew your house and the rest of the street was being looked after when you were away.

Then Bob had had a change of job and they had had to move away. They moved into a detached house with a good sized garden for the children to play in. Their children had grown up there and been very happy. She remembered their neighbours. On one side were Mr and Mrs Ward, whose children had already grown up and left home. They were a kind couple and would do whatever they could to help. On the other side, in a smaller house, lived Mrs Watkins, a widow who loved her garden. She was not as outgoing as the Wards, but was friendly enough and would give helpful advice on anything to do with the garden.

Across the road were a couple with young children. Unlike the street where they had lived before, this was a busy road so they did not see as much of those neighbours as they might have done. Next to them lived another couple; the husband was rather moody and grumpy. They did

not have much to do with them.

As well as these immediate neighbours, they had during the years they lived there built up a whole network of friends. There had been dinner parties to arrange and dinner parties to attend. It had been a very happy time and Joan looked back with fond memories and wondered what had happened to those neighbours and friends. Their immediate neighbours, she knew, had died several years ago. She still kept in touch with some of those friends, but she wondered what had happened to the others.

Then Bob was made redundant and had to look for other work. Fortunately he had foreseen this possibility and had retrained; he did find work but it had taken them half way across England to find it. So they moved again. Now that their children had grown up, they looked for something smaller and found a nice bungalow; but they made up for it with a large garden, which Joan had liked. Bob would mow the lawns, prune trees and trim the hedges and so forth; but Joan liked what she called the "real gardening."

She remembered their neighbours. On one side was a widow who clearly valued privacy with her high fences and hedges. Joan had tried to be friendly; it had been hard work at first, but eventually they discovered they both had a love of gardening. She discovered that Nadia was of Serbo-Croat origin, though she could never discover whether Serbian or Croat. Nadia told her that in her country when she grew up people snooped on one another; it had left her suspicious of everyone and made her want to keep herself to herself even after all the years she had lived in this country. Eventually Nadia had moved to the south coast to be closer to her daughter. She wondered what had happened to Nadia. Was she still alive?

When Nadia had moved, a younger couple moved in. They, like Joan and Bob, were now by themselves, their children having grown up. They had got on well with these new neighbours; they still lived there and she heard from them every now and again.

On the other side of them had been Frank, a widower who, quite the opposite of Nadia on their other side, had been very outgoing and friendly. Frank had always been ready to help if he could; he had lent Bob tools and helped out on more difficult jobs like pollarding trees. He had been an excellent neighbour. She remembered particularly one occasion when they were having an extension built. The builders had not properly secured the tarpaulin over the exposed area; the night before they were due to go off on holiday, it had been windy and rained hard. They woke the next morning to find the living room carpet completely waterlogged; it was like walking on boggy ground.

They explained to Frank that Bob would have to stay and sort things out, but Frank would have none of it. They must both go and he would see to the builders. He was as good as his word. When they returned, they found everything dry and the extension now waterproof.

"Yes," thought Joan, "Frank had been a very good neighbour."

Then Frank had been called to glory. That was several years ago; a new neighbour, Edward, moved in. He also was a widower and, like Frank, outgoing and friendly, but, unlike Frank, having neither a workshop of tools nor expertise for do-it-yourself. Edward was still there when she had left; she wondered if he was still there now or had passed on too?

It was a cul-de-sac where their bungalow had been. She thought of other neighbours in the close. The bungalow opposite had changed hands several times while they were there; they had never got to know any of the people very well before they moved again. Then there were the odd couple, Brian and Alice, next door to them. They were not married, apparently; she learnt that Brian had moved in with Alice and helped maintain the house and garden. It seemed he actually had another small bungalow in the next street which he largely neglected but retained as storage

space. Alice had seemed rather shy and kept herself to herself, but Brian was more outgoing and seemed to think he knew most things about most things. He was never backward in giving advice whether the recipient wanted it or not. But they had started to show their age before she had left; they must have been well into their eighties then. What had happened to them?

There were others in the close they had known; but she was getting them confused now.

All her life, Joan had had neighbours: never any really bad ones. She was grateful for that. Many of the neighbours had been very good. But now, who was her neighbour? She was lonely in the flats.

Joan looked back at the 10th chapter of Luke. The priest and the Levite passed by on the other side. “That's what folk seem to do here,” she thought, “they pass by on the other side almost as though they do not see me. Why, I could be dying here in this flat, just like the person attacked and beaten by the robbers, and no one would know.”

It was not a very pleasant thought. She remembered she had heard more than once on the news of someone dying alone and not being discovered until weeks or even months afterwards. She shuddered. That could not happen to her, could it?

Joan turned again to her scripture passage. If only, she thought, a good Samaritan would discover me.

Suddenly there was a knock on her door. Joan wondered who it could be. She answered the door.

“Hello,” said the visitor, “I'm Nasreen from our local community centre. I know how lonely people can be living in these flats. I wondered if you would like me to come in and tell you about ourselves?”

“Oh yes please, Nasreen,” said Joan. “I'm Joan, please come in.”

“Perhaps I shall find my neighbour after all,” thought Joan.