

When Dickens uses the phrase 'telescopic philanthropy' he's making the point that it's easier to love others at a distance than near at hand – 'love' in inverted commas because this isn't really love at all but a deferred exercise in loving ones neighbour, at getting to grips with the fact of those who are on ones doorstep, within ones family, part of ones immediate community. And the best place for learning this 'microscopic philanthropy, or rather 'testing it' is when we encounter the stranger at our door, or within our neighbourhood – whatever that might be. And the test is immediately one of adaptation, one of change - we think we can be ourselves with those we truly know but the proof of who we really are is our encounter with those who do not already know us. So there is a tension or a paradox here – do we present ourselves as we really are or to the stranger or do we change in our attitude, become more defensive perhaps or patronising in order to keep the stranger at a distance – and is this change then true and necessary or false and unnecessary? What I'm thinking of here is the wonderful transparency of Br Herbert who would make immediate contact with anyone at the door, or anywhere for that matter, that is with the ability to make anyone and everyone feel at home in his presence and the danger or difficulty this sometimes posed for the rest of the community, or prior to that, his mother and family. He had 'microscopic philanthropy' in spades – if you'll allow the mixed metaphors. But it carried a risk not only for others but for himself as the new friend could ultimately, or sometimes more immediately, be very demanding. There was the time he spent £100 on tea towels because the person at the door had a disability and Br Herbert couldn't say 'no' to someone in need. And a relative once told me of his mother's fear that he would give away the family silver, such as it was, if asked. This is why both 'change' and 'transparency' are necessary in any act of love – and the need indeed for them to become 'one' – for the test the new neighbour brings to us is not whether we adapt ourselves entirely to their needs (as they might see them) but whether we can adapt ourselves to see their 'real need' - what it is that's best for them, and perhaps oneself, at that moment of encounter. The test that this – is still 'love' is that there is a risk involved – each person will demand a different degree of trust, both for their own sake and for oneself. It's a learning process demanding prayer – Lord what do I do in this instance? But offering the stranger a cup of tea is often a good start or in our case a meal or perhaps a bed for the night. The response will differ for each of us depending on our circumstances and responsibilities. This is where the Law has to be interpreted by the Spirit and our true relationship with God, our most immediate neighbour, is tested for ultimately who isn't 'in need'?

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