

## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fourth Sunday After Trinity

readings: [Deuteronomy 30.9-14](#), [Colossians 1.1-14](#), [Luke 10.25-37](#)

10 July 2022

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the best known stories in the Bible. Ask people perhaps only with distant Sunday School memories to fall back on, to name a story which Jesus told - and if they know any bible stories at all, you are quite likely to get this one.

We often take it for granted that we know what the best known parables are about, to the extent that our mind goes into overdrive when we hear them. We know - or think we know - the story so well. In my first year as an undergraduate at university studying theology, we had to learn NT Greek - the language in which the NT was originally written. At the end of the first term - by which time we knew very little vocabulary, even if we were picking up a bit of grammar - we had a test to see how we were doing - and we were given a passage to translate. The lecturer told us that to help us with the vocabulary, he was giving us a list of some of the words in the passage and their translations. As we looked down the translations, we found words and phrases like Priest, Levite, Samaritan, Robbers, Beaten, half-dead. Well, that gave most of us enough to go on to pass the test - even without bothering to look at the Greek text very much. But it was a salutary exercise in remembering the story off by heart right down to the little details of nuance. When we know the story well, we tend when we re-read it, or listen to it again, to gloss over the detail, because, after all, we know it already, don't we.

The same is true about meaning. We know the story so well, that we think also that we know what it means too - and so, maybe, don't look too closely at it. This one, we would say, of course, is about showing neighbourly kindness to people we find in need. Loving our neighbour. Well it is about that, but actually it's about much more than that. The key to the meaning of many of the parables in the Gospels is to look for the scenario which precedes it, which sets the context in which Jesus told the story. Because Jesus's parables are rarely spoken in a vacuum, but as a response to a direct question or situation. Here, it is a direct question

So, in this case, let's find the question. And this is one of the easier ones to root out. A lawyer, out to test Jesus asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus responds, basically, love God and your neighbour as yourself. Then comes the big question—the one which prompts the parable. The lawyer asks, And who is my neighbour?

And who is my neighbour? This is the question. Love your neighbour as yourself. That's the Law. That's taken as read. The question is : but who is my neighbour? For the Jew, with their strong sense of national identity. God's chosen people. Sons and daughters of Abraham. The standard answer was obvious. Other Jews. The Jewish religion is something you're born into. Even today, Judaism is not a religion which actually goes out of its way to seek converts. At the same time - this very strong sense of one nation. Heirs through birth. By contrast - Jews and Samaritans hated the sight of each other and avoided contact with each other. We know all too well, that that sorry region of the world is still racked by hatred and divisions on account of racial and religious tensions.

There's more, though. Because the point is not just that the poor unfortunate Jew was not helped by his natural neighbour - a fellow Jew - but by an alien Samaritan. That's partly it. But it's not just any Jew that passes him by. It's a priest and a Levite. Now, priests in the Jewish sense, are not to be confused with Rabbis. The Rabbis were the teachers - the Jewish ministers if you like. Priests had a particular function - that of offering the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. And they were priests by birth. All priests were Levites. That is to say, belonging to the tribe of Levi. The Levites were the priestly tribe from the earliest times.

However, not all Levites were priests. There were simply too many of them. So only Levites who were descendants of Aaron were priests - and other Levites were - like temple assistants. And they used to take turns at Jerusalem. Turns, of course, came up relatively infrequently.

So, the point here, is that those who left the Jew by the roadside were not just fellow Jews, but temple officials, on their way to make the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. And the Jewish laws of ritual purity were very rigorous. To touch a dead body - which the story implies the beaten Jew looked like - would have rendered the priest and the Levite ritually unclean. They would not have been able to continue to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifices if they had come into contact with this man. And the opportunity to do so didn't come up very often. So they pass by on the other side, to avoid any contact which would have interfered with their ritual purity.

So the story becomes a dilemma between maintaining the outward show of religion - the Jewish rituals - and ordinary common decency and compassion for a fellow human being. The temple officials continue with the outward forms of their religion, while it is left to the Samaritan to help the Jew in distress. This is Jesus's point.

You can't set the outward form of religion over and above common humanity. And there are other examples of Jesus making the same point—for example, when he gets into trouble over healing on the sabbath.

The Institutional Church today sometimes needs to hear that message. The Church doesn't have a monopoly on doing good. Many individuals and organisations are actively involved in good neighbourliness while the church sometimes turns inward on itself and gets issues about church life and worship blown up out of all proportion. Things that are irrelevant to the needs of ordinary people.

The neighbour is the one who showed kindness - whoever or whatever he may be. Modern examples are not difficult to find. You can probably think of your own - where your natural neighbour turns out not to be the neighbour after all, and neighbourliness comes from the most surprising quarter. A priest friend of mine, living alone, had not been very well - and the one person from his congregation who rang him up offering practical help - shopping and so on - was the person with whom he'd had a heated argument at a Church Council meeting the previous week.

And Jesus said to the lawyer - 'Go and do likewise'. Clearly the main point is for us to behave in the same fashion as the Samaritan. But remember, also that it works both ways. One thing which strikes me about the parable of the good Samaritan is that we know no more at the end of the story than at the beginning about the man who was beaten up and left by the roadside. The parable is about the reactions of all the other characters in the story. If the Samaritans hated the Jews, so did the Jews hate the Samaritans. When the Samaritan came to the man's aid, we're left to assume that the man, beaten half dead, didn't know much about the man who was helping him. We don't discover subsequently whether his reaction to being helped by a Samaritan was one of gratitude and humility, or one of horror and revulsion. We are simply not told the answer to that. But we can surmise that if it was hard for the Samaritan to help the Jew, it was equally as hard for the Jew to receive help from the Samaritan. Often, one of the most difficult things for us to do, is to receive help from a person we would rather not receive help from.

How often might you hear someone say something like, 'I'd rather die than receive help from them'. I wonder if you can think of situations you've been in when you've refused help from a stranger or someone you feel uncomfortable about? Or, I wonder if you can recall situations where you've been surprised or even humbled by receiving help or kindness from a totally unexpected quarter?

Neighbourliness works two ways. And who is my neighbour? Perhaps the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us equally as much about being in receipt of neighbourliness as about giving it. And it teaches us that the true neighbour is the person who judges someone not in terms of who they are but in terms of their need, whoever they may be.