



Sermon at the High Sheriff's Legal Service

Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity

Readings: [Psalm 122.1-3, 6-7](#)

20 October 2024

In 1977 Margaret Thatcher famously said, or perhaps infamously said “there is no such thing as society”. Now as a social sciences graduate of the Open University, I could lead an interesting debate on what she meant by that comment and what we mean by society. The Dean will no doubt be relieved to hear that I have no intention of doing that!

For me all of you here this afternoon give the lie to that statement. Ranging from the youngsters who are members of the police cadets and the air cadets, to the volunteers who support them, even to old codgers like me who act as volunteer chaplains. We represent a huge number of people, who freely give of their time and talents to support all kinds of service, without which our society, our community, could not operate. I hate to remind Ian and Sylvia that this service marks the half way point in his year of office. I don't know exactly how many events he has attended, but I think at this point it is over 130.

Every one of those events has represented official recognition of the wonderful work being done by charities and volunteers in our community. In many cases by unsung heroes, who expect no personal reward, but value the endorsement, support and publicity that the office of the High Sheriff can give them.

But of course this service is not just about celebrating the role of volunteers and the work of charities in our communities, as important as that is. As the service booklet says we are here to give thanks to all those organisations, who work continuously to keep our community safe, to uphold the rule of law and perhaps a rather old fashioned phrase; to maintain the King's peace. This includes the Judiciary, the Police service, the Fire service, Prisons, the Probation Service, Local Government and the list goes on. Without the work of these organisations and all those employed by them, to support the work of maintaining the rule of law, community cohesion would come under severe threat.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes the point that the Church and equally our community/society is made up of a diverse range of people. Each of them have their own gifts and talents. If we look at the wonders and breadth of creation that surround us we can see that God loves diversity. Diversity is not to be constrained, or forced into conformity, but to be encouraged, nurtured and used to best effect.

In management theory there is a concept known as “Team Synergy”. What this means is that a well-functioning team, will produce output that significantly exceeds the sum of the outputs of each individual. I'm sure Wayne can testify to the fact that even if he has a pretty good season with the bat he needs every other member of the team to bring their skills to bear, if they are to achieve success. Human beings are social animals, we work better and we live better, if we are part of a community. But that is not something that comes easily, because the diversity of our community has the potential to create conflict, division, misunderstanding and exclusion and unfairness.

Our reading from Luke's Gospel conveys some of that tension. The parable of the Good Samaritan is extremely well known, familiar to people who are not Christian, or not conversant with the Bible. So familiar that we will commonly refer to anyone who does a good deed, as a "Good Samaritan". We even have an organisation that works with people at risk of suicide called "The Samaritans". That familiarity can sometimes hide from us the deeper meaning of the parable. It is not just a story of someone taking compassion on another person in trouble; having so much compassion that they not only gave of their time, but also their hard-earned money. To understand the real import of the Samaritan's actions we need to look at the other characters in the story.

First we have a priest and then a Levite come down the road, but they pass by on the other side. Both these individuals were devout Jews and Judaism has within it a strong tenet of looking after the poor and disadvantaged. So we could be forgiven for thinking "there we are two religious people failing to live out their religious principles." But before we rush to judgement we need to remember that this guy it seems had been pretty badly beaten up and so maybe, just maybe they thought he was dead, or about to die. Now that created a dilemma because in Judaism touching a dead body made you ritually unclean. So maybe we can just about understand their reluctance to get involved. Anyway, before we rush to judgement, perhaps we should take a moment to reflect on the times we have not wanted to get involved. The times when we have metaphorically walked past on the other side of the road.

Then we have the hero of the story – the Samaritan. Now to understand just how shocking this parable was to those listening to Jesus, we need to remember that Samaritans were Jews, but they did not worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. They worshipped in what we might describe as "House Churches". There was huge animosity between Jews and Samaritans and his listeners would have been horrified that Jesus was suggesting that a hated Samaritan might be a better person than a respected Priest, or Levite. Again perhaps we should pause to reflect on the judgements we make about people, especially those whose customs are different from us, those who look different or behave differently. Have we failed to spot the essence of God within them, as one of God's children?

I guess some of you, who work with the poor and disadvantaged, might be thinking, but was this Samaritan such a hero? Surely he could have done more? He could have considered the safety of this road to Jericho – was there a need to create a police force to maintain law and order? He might have pondered on why these men had turned to a life of crime. Were they unemployed, were they desperate for money to feed their families? Was there a need for support agencies and perhaps a rehabilitation programme to put them back on the straight and narrow? There are potentially all sorts of questions that might be asked, because all he had done was tackle the effects of crime, rather than tackling the causes of crime. But he was just one man - he did what he could.

Many of you no doubt face enormous pressures in your work and may be in danger of feeling overwhelmed. But you do what you can and thank God that you do. So I want to close by thanking all of you for all that you do to build up our community and keep it safe. I want to thank Ian for the splendid work he has done and will continue to do as High Sheriff and thank all those who are supporting him and especially Sylvia.

Let us pray: Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for all those who work to build up our community and to keep us Safe. Today we especially give thanks for the Office of High Sheriff and ask you to bless Ian and Sylvia, as they continue to carry out their duties. Amen

The Revd Robert Atkins

