

Year C Proper 15

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10: 25-37

There was Englishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman... or something like that. You have probably heard many a joke that involves three people: We all instinctively know that the first two will behave in an expected way, and the third will not. The anticipation and tension in the joke is waiting to find out in what way the third person stereotypically behaves that creates the punchline. The first provocation in Jesus' story is that the listeners would have expected the third character in the story to have been an Israelite, but it wasn't. It was a Samaritan, from a generally despised ethnic and religious group.

The parable Jesus told is so, so familiar to us. We call it the 'Good Samaritan'. Even the title should be a big flashing neon-like sign of warning to us. As a story about a 'good' Samaritan it implies that for most, if not all the listeners, Samaritans are not expected to be good.

The parable Jesus told to the expert in the law involves a Levite, a priest and a Samaritan. It takes place somewhere on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, and it is important to the story that the people are all travelling **from** Jerusalem to Jericho. The two cities are 18 miles apart, with Jerusalem at about 2,500 above sea level and Jericho 825 feet below sea level.

We may assume, as those listening to this parable are most likely to have done, that the Levite and the priest have been visiting the Temple in Jerusalem and making their way home. On this basis neither of them would have been transgressing the purity laws of the Torah, in fact Leviticus 21:1-2 states that a priest would only be defiled if the man was dead. Remember that the man robbed and beaten by the bandits on the road was half-dead, which also means he was half-alive. Levites were not restricted by the same purity laws as priests, so there is no reason for the Levite to pass by. In addition, any period of being unclean would not have greatly interrupted their lives as they were returning from Jerusalem and the Temple, rather than going up to Jerusalem

to visit the Temple. Added to that, Samaritans also had purity laws about touching the dead, similar to Jewish purity laws.

So, none of the three had a reason based on their ethnic and religious laws to avoid care of the badly wounded victim lying by the roadside. And in addition to that, Jewish law demanded utmost respect for a dead body, and yet they did not check to see if the man was dead; the priest and Levite both walked by.

As we heard the expert in law recite, the Shema (Deut 6:5 & Lev 19:18) clearly states that we are to love our neighbour, whether we know them or whether they are a stranger. Deut 6:5 was known to Jews as the Great Commandment; so great that Deut 6: 4-9 says that they were to keep the words in their hearts, bind them to their hands, wear them on their forehead and fix it to their doorposts and gates.

So, the priest and the Levite by walking by, contravened the great commandment of their faith.

And yet, the generally hated and despised Samaritan, was 'good', and not only checked to see if the man was alive but met his immediate needs **and** his ongoing recuperation. It wasn't a one-off act of mercy but included a level of generosity that seemed open-ended, relying on the honesty of the landlord to provide all that the poor beaten man needed to regain his health.

That is where the parable ends. A person who represents a hated ethnic and religious group has provided the sort of mercy that the Jewish faith requires of its followers.

But Jesus hasn't finished with the expert in the law. Jesus asks him a further question.

'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'

The expert replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'

The response of the expert is troubling. It is as if he couldn't even bring himself to say the word 'Samaritan', so he used an impersonal identifier. Maybe I am reading too much into his response, and the expert was describing the actions

of the Samaritan to signal he understood the parable? That the parable was about more than feeling compassion for the half-dead man, but about enacting God's mercy. It must have been quite hard to understand the full force of Jesus' parable – that the Samaritan did what God asks of all Jews, that is, to act with justice and mercy, and to acknowledge that the divine is truly manifested through our actions.

Jesus final imperative to the expert in the law was, 'Go and do likewise'. Four simple words, not fluffed up with tricky theological words, just a command to hold God's love in his heart and act out God's mercy whenever possible.

This imperative was heard by all who gathered around to hear the parable, and it has been read and heard by countless hundreds of millions throughout all of time since then.

Apart from the parable illustrating what God's mercy looks like - a continuing and generous care for others; the greatest challenge to the first hearers and to us today is to reflect on who have we constructed in our personal thoughts as our enemy, who have we constructed in our local community as our enemy, who have we constructed in our national identity and psyche as our enemy? Who might we need to add the prefix 'good' to in order to see some worth in an individual?

There are times when it is so much easier to create 'them' and 'us' thoughts, to separate out people who I think are like me, who I find it easy to mix with and share a lot in common. But that is a slippery slope that starts to build walls between me and my neighbours, that can lead to labelling a certain group as my enemy.

This parable invites us to do some serious prayerful reflection and continual spiritual work to resist the temptations to create such divisions in our mind, to sow the seeds of difference. Jesus calls us to be able to respond with mercy, with generous continuing mercy, to any we find on our pilgrimage through life who are in need of God's love and mercy being shown to them. And that is so much easier if we have not constructed them in our minds and hearts as our enemies, for we are required to bind up their wounds and care for them.

This parable is more than about being compassionate to our neighbour – it is demanding us to search our hearts and to maintain a by no means easy spiritual discipline of love, where we dismantle our existing them and us thoughts and feelings and continually work to model our lives on Christ, to see with His eyes, to care with His hands and feet, through which He blesses the world.

This is a tough challenge, our human propensity to live in a dualistic world is so strong, and yet, when we ask for God's help, when we call on the Holy Spirit to guide and lead us, we may be able to attain the position where we can say that we keep the Shema alive in our hearts each and every day. That must be the goal we wish to attain, no matter how difficult it is.

We know that this is a tough challenge. Why else would our Jewish brothers and sisters need to write it on their gate and doorposts, and some of them insist on writing it on their hands and binding the words to their foreheads?

I wonder if writing it somewhere would help us in our lives? Maybe beside my shaving mirror so I stare at it each morning? Or maybe by my light switch at my bedside? Or maybe on my mobile phone? What might work for you?

Notes:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” — **Teresa of Avila**

My preparatory reading for this sermon including re-reading a chapter on the 'Good Samaritan' in Ami-Jill Levine's book, 'Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi.' This is our Faith Book we shall be discussing on Monday 31st October at 7 pm.