

The Good Samaritan

Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37

"When a parable becomes a cliché, can it still function the life of the community? A 'Good Samaritan' is commonly recognized as anyone who comes to the aid of another. But is this really what Jesus was getting at? Was He only offering a variation on, 'Be helpful when you come across people in trouble'?ⁱ

No matter how often this story is told and heard, no matter how familiar we think we are with it, it continues to speak into our C21st world. Amongst many things it speaks into a world turned in on itself and frequently intentionally or unintentionally selfish and self-satisfying. It speaks of the relationship we might have with God, and ought to have, and the relationship we have with our neighbours, the rest of the world, and ought to have. Both the Saviour, and the Lawyer, know their Bible.

When Jesus asks, "What is written in the Law, how do you read?" He uses the Hebrew word *Torah*. He and the lawyer knew that this was no simple set of commandments, a tick-box in formulaic piety. *Torah* means 'guidance, teaching, instruction.' It is a culture of covenanted responsiveness, a lived relationship and lifestyle between God and God's people. It evokes certain attitudes, conduct, state and civic policy. It means how does God relate to us and what does God expect from us, but equally, how do we relate to God, and what might we expect from God. It is not a contract. It is a covenant with shared responsibilities.

For us it quite clearly entails and imposes specific disciplines on our common life. If we choose to be indifferent towards it, it will lead to greedy, destructive, unsustainable behaviour. Economics without covenantal responsiveness becomes predatory. Agriculture without covenantal

responsiveness becomes destructive of the land. To live with a Godward relationship, '*...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*', and a human-ward relationship, '*(love) your neighbour as yourself*', precludes both fearful legalism and prideful, despairing autonomy.ⁱⁱ

The lawyer asked, '*what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*' It is clear that the lawyer already knew the answers to his question. The lawyer tested Jesus and both agreed on the answers. But Jesus wanted the lawyer to go further. It is not simply about *knowing*; it is about *doing* and *applying* and *living*.

Like today's driving test: there's a theory part - which is important. But there is also the practical part, which is vital.

Jesus says to the lawyer, and to us, You've got the theory, but it's the next bit that is going to matter. "You have answered right; do this, and you will live.... Go, and do likewise."

Do. Do. Do.

Who is my neighbour? In this multi-cultural, diverse world, this tartan society that weaves in different genders, races, families, human sexualities, economic backgrounds, cultural heritages, who is my neighbour? In a country that once gloried in a global empire were all were different yet all had a place (and I'm not saying it was all perfect, but the theme of multiculturalism is centuries old) then it was shocking to see the Moygashel Bonfire Committee in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, setting alight a bonfire on Thursday that had as its 'topper' a small boat with effigies of migrants in it, and the slogan, 'Stop the Boats'. The complex challenge of legal and illegal immigration is hard, but the incitement to racial hatred is disgraceful, and sinful.

Who is my neighbour?

Rupert Lowe, a 'Reform' MP, has called for the burqa to be banned. Protests against the call have been strong. Even Larry the Downing Street Cat took to Twitter/X to borrow a response: "*A woman in a burqa has never done me any harm. Women wearing burqas haven't told me lies to get me to vote for them. They haven't cost me money by mismanaging businesses. They haven't got drunk and spouted abuse. Men in suits did though; maybe we should ban suits?*" Well, quite.

Who is my neighbour?

At least 15 Palestinians, including eight children and two women, have been killed in an Israeli strike while queuing for nutritional supplements in front of a clinic in central Gaza, a hospital said. The bodies of several children and others lay on the floor as medics treated their wounds. US-based aid group Project Hope, which runs the clinic, said the attack was a blatant violation of international law. The Israeli military said it struck a "Hamas terrorist" and regretted any harm to civilians. They were among 66 people reportedly killed in Israeli strikes on Thursday, as Israel and Hamas continued talks on a ceasefire.

Who is my neighbour?

Jesus speaks: man is going down from Jerusalem, David's City of Peace, perched high on a hill, twenty miles through the wilderness, to Jericho, located at the edge of the Dead Sea. It is a dangerous road, not one to travel alone. He is attacked by robbers, beaten and left for dead. He is seen by two religious leaders who pass him by on the other side. The Samaritan, the enemy of the Jews, from the community that had refused to welcome Jesus on His way to Jerusalem that we read about a couple of weeks ago, stopped, moved by compassion, helped, healed, accompanied, provided more than what many would have considered necessary. Inside the story Jesus tells of the Good Samaritan, Martin Luther King Jr observed, "The first question which the priest and Levite asked was: 'If I stop and help this man (the wounded traveller) what will happen

to me?' But...the good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" And also, if the Good Samaritan did not stop, what would happen to his own humanity and integrity and compassion and solidarity? What difference would his faith have, whatever it was, if he did not do something to help?

Who is my neighbour?

One of our elders asked me last week, "What's going wrong with the world?" In a world polarised into Labour and Conservative and Nationalist. Republican and Democrat. Europhile and Brexiteer. Black and white. Protestant and Catholic. Jew and Muslim. This polarised world and its convenient pigeonholes into which we deposit our prejudices and not have to think too much about the direct, and indirect, damage such casual brutality causes.

A few years ago, I read about a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmad Khatib, who had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers in Jenin, the West Bank. The boy had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital where he died after two days. His parents made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant to Israelis. Six people received his heart, lungs and kidneys. The boy's mother said, "My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others." Those parents, at the cruellest of times, made their own journey into the compassion of God and were living eternal life.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Psalmist wrote centuries before Jesus that we should *"give justice to the weak and fatherless, maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute, rescue the weak and the needy..."* Who is my neighbour? These are our neighbours. Not all at death's door, but many around us needing that little kindness and laughter, that little welcome and blessing, that little generosity and hope that it might well be within our power to offer today, this week, next month, all year round.

Perhaps we might think of ourselves as not being the favoured fortunate who can help the less fortunate, but identifying ourselves with the man in the ditch, beaten, abandoned, left for dead. When have we been needy and at the mercy of the outsider, the stranger, the one who would be seen as our enemy, and needed desperate help? An illegal migrant helping a British 'patriot'? A Palestinian Hamas fighter helping an Israeli soldier? The Hibs supporter helping the Hearts supporter? (Too far?)

The Good Samaritan is more than a story about a helpful stranger. It is about the transforming power of God at work in our world today, changing us. Reminding us of our calling to engage with God, and with our neighbour, doing what we can, and what we must, so that we too might inherit eternal life.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ James A Wallace, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3*, p239

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Gift and Task*, p237

ⁱⁱⁱ James A Wallace, *ibid*, p243