

Sermon for 10th July 2022, Year C, Trinity 4, Proper 10

Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden

Luke 10:25-37.

Sermon

The Good Samaritan is almost certainly Jesus' most famous parable. It's so famous that the phrase 'Good Samaritan' has entered our language to mean anyone who does a good deed where it might have been easier to ignore the situation and go on our way.

It's certainly a story that can make us feel guilty if we fail to help someone in need because we're in a hurry or are tired or simply overwhelmed by compassion fatigue.

Like the lawyer who is testing Jesus, we often want to know where the legitimate boundaries are on our love. How much does God really expect of us? What's the pass mark for heaven? How many times do we need to go to church? How many hours of prayer? How much money must we give? How many sessions need I work at the foodbank? How many Big Issues must I buy? How many years must I be churchwarden or on the PCC? There must be limits; we can't help everyone.

For the lawyer, the boundaries are a problem more to do with who's in and who's out, rather than how frequently he must respond. What he really believes is that charity begins at home – and ends at home. He'll work tirelessly for his neighbour but wants to carefully define who the neighbour is. Yes, we do this too. We'll give to local charities in preference to national ones. We'll give to British charities but not international ones. We'll happily pay taxes for the NHS but not for foreign aid. We like the idea of low-cost housing for local people in need, but not so much for immigrants and asylum seekers. Like the lawyer we

nod vigorously when Jesus says we should love God and love our neighbour as ourselves, but I bet all our brains are immediately clarifying, calculating and quantifying justifications for where we place the limits. I'm probably making you feel guilty just by talking about it.

So, Jesus tells all of us the parable. A man is beaten and stripped naked and left for dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This road was so dangerous in Jesus' day that it was known as the Way of Blood because of the number of bandits harassing travellers.

Martin Luther King in his 'I've been to the mountaintop' speech the day before his death, points out that the priest and the Levite would have been terrified not so much of ritual contamination or the expense of having to bury a dead body, as of the risk that it might be a trap, that the bandits might still be around. *Their* first thought on being confronted by someone else's need was to rationalise that their need was greater. They saw someone in trouble and their first thought was 'me'. These are the keepers of the tradition, but their understanding of love and their understanding of neighbour do not extend the width of the road.

The man is naked. His nakedness is important. It prevents us judging whether he *deserves* our love, pity and assistance. The priest and Levite can't tell if he's middle class, one of their own, or some homeless guy who's probably already refused all help and hardly deserves a second glance.

The Samaritan on the other hand, brings a jarring shock to the middle of the story that is completely lost on most of us two thousand years on. Samaritans were the remnants of Israelites conquered by the Assyrians, and then left behind when the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon. They worshipped the same God, and had the same Hebrew scriptures, but had a temple at Mount Gerizim instead of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. And it's safe to say that the Jews and Samaritans absolutely hated each other and thought of each other as morally

corrupt and heretical – probably not dissimilar to the Protestants and Catholics burning each other at the stake during the Reformation.

Only one chapter ago in the gospel of Luke, you will remember that Jesus was turned away from a Samaritan village which he'd intended to visit, simply because they heard he was travelling to Jerusalem. James and John, those hotheads, were so insulted they asked Jesus if they should call down fire to destroy the place. Jesus rebuked them at the time, but I wonder if this parable featuring the hated Samaritan as a neighbour and saviour, might have been a not-so-subtle dig at James and John as well.

The point is, Jesus wants us to be shocked and surprised at where the compassion is coming from. In his parable we, like the lawyer, might initially identify with the priest and the Levite – the religious middle-class people, but *Jesus really wants the lawyer and us to realise that we are the beaten and bruised half-dead naked man who is about to be loved by someone whose goodness he does not expect or deserve and cannot begin to fathom.*

This is the real power of the parable. It's not just a story to make us think about whom we exclude and ignore, and encourage us in persistent kindness towards the outsider, although it does do that. It's a story that brings us up short when we realise that the times when we've been most moved by someone's love and care for us has been when that love has come from the most unexpected quarters, perhaps even from someone who should hate or disdain us. And perhaps it's that shock that jolts us out of our comfort zone and makes us want to go and do likewise. If we find it hard to be a Good Samaritan, perhaps it's because we've not yet experienced being the beaten-up man in the road. We have to know what it's like to be radically and unexpectedly and unconditionally loved, before we can do the same for others.

For example, I came to faith in the first place because when I got mad at a Christian at college and peppered him with insults, he apologised and was kind

to me in response. I expected him to hate or ignore me, but he received and acknowledged my fury and anguish which was not really directed at him, held my pain, and took me to the inn, or in my case the college bar, and told me about his friend Jesus.

And does anyone remember that famous scene in the film 'Good Will Hunting' where the psychologist played by Robin Williams finally breaks through the emotional hurts and barriers of Matt Damon's abused character Will, by telling him repeatedly, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault". I choke up every time I see it. The two characters had been at each other's throats for most of the movie, but in the moment of crisis, it is Will Hunting's nemesis who goes out on a limb to rescue him.

Jesus finishes his parable by turning the lawyer's challenge back on himself. 'Who was the one who was the neighbour?' he asks. The lawyer can't bring himself to say, 'The Samaritan', and many preachers have speculated that this is because he hates them so much, he can't even say their name. But I wonder if he's had a revelation that really, he's the one who's naked and beaten, and right at this moment it's his enemy, Jesus, who is unexpectedly showing him mercy, offering a rescue from his anger and distress. And perhaps he also has a glimmer of an idea that this Jesus, the one who continues to reach out and love even those who ignore and reject him, is God himself.