

The Good Samaritan.

A sermon by Authorised Lay Preacher, John Boylan at All Saints Church Wokingham

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Gospel reading: Luke 10.25-37

Can there be anyone here who does not know the story of the Good Samaritan? Alongside the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan is probably the other best-known bible story. And why not? Don't we all associate with or recognise ourselves in the characters? In the Prodigal it may be the Father allowing his son freedom to make mistakes, fearing him lost and then welcoming him back into the family. Or maybe we can relate to the son going off the rails and when all seems lost, experiencing the love and forgiveness of the father. Perhaps for some the older brother demonstrating jealousy and a sense that life just isn't fair may strike a chord. We've all been there. And it is no different with the story of the Good Samaritan. I'm sure we would all like to think of ourselves as reaching out and caring for someone in trouble. Although if we are honest, if faced with the situation we may not be so forthcoming. But before we get into the familiar storyline perhaps, we should just pause to consider why Jesus delivered the parable in the first place. It was a conversation with a lawyer that prompted it by asking Jesus the question "Who is my neighbour". Having given this passage some thought I think that we could be more closely aligned with this Lawyer than with the actual characters in the story. It's in his argument and reaction where we find the contemporary parallels. It's certainly worth revisiting the story from this slightly different perspective.

Mark 12.28-34 and Matthew 22.34-40 also introduce the lawyer. Although Mark is ambivalent, both Matthew and Luke indicate that the lawyer was 'testing' Jesus, but 'testing' could mean a lot of things. The conspiracy theory would suggest that like the Pharisees, the lawyer was trying to catch Jesus out and thereby discredit or condemn him. But maybe that goes too far in this case. Consider for a moment that the question "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" was maybe a genuine request or at least a question worded to open a debate on the law. As a lawyer, he would have spent most of his life studying the Torah so debating and challenging the smallest detail would be second nature. He would almost certainly have developed the competitive question- answer format used to win an argument or elicit the detail. There is an old Jewish saying that whenever two Jews meet there are always three opinions! Lawyers and rabbis were past masters at debating.

The danger here as we have witnessed in the recent Conservative party leadership debates, verbal jousting, no matter how clever can quickly become a game or a contest in which the aim is to get one over on your opponent and not necessarily to discover the truth.

Jesus nevertheless responds in kind by returning the challenge – 'you're the expert, you study the law, you tell me'. And sure enough, almost to prove the question was pre-planned, the answer is both immediate and scriptural; "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 8.5) and "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19.18).

Jesus appears to be playing the game saying "you have answered correctly. Do this and you will live" and "Go and do likewise". Now that was easy. Jesus tells the lawyer that all he has to do is do what he knew all along he had to do. But is Jesus commending the lawyer or condemning him? We don't know the

inflection but “Do *this* and you shall live” can imply that the lawyer is not doing what he knows he should, and Jesus is reprimanding him for failing to practice what he was quick to answer.

Jerome Bruner an American psychologist gives us an useful analogy. If a composer writes a symphonic music score it is not complete until an orchestra turns the written notes into beautiful music. He argues that the same is true of religious teaching. Words can be perfect on paper but mean little unless put into action.

And the lawyer almost concedes the point but presses on, unwilling to lose the debate or accept any censure. “Who is my neighbour?” he asks. And let’s be fair, in his lawyer’s mind this is not an unreasonable question; how can he love his neighbour until he knows who that is? He is pushing for clear boundaries and a delineation so that he knows exactly whom his neighbour is and therefore whom he should love. However, being a lawyer, he probably already has a view on this and may be more concerned with clarification of who is not his neighbour because it then makes it easier to justify his viewpoint and actions.

Jesus could of course take the easy option and simply say “everyone is your neighbour”. But that wouldn’t work as the lawyer was pushing for clear boundaries. And of course, Jesus was trying to get him to understand that if he were true to the scripture and loved God and his neighbour, there could be no fences or division. I saw an article recently that suggested we should all focus not on the fence but on the neighbour behind the fence, because when one focusses on the neighbour, then we hardly see the fence.

The parable of the Good Samaritan sets out to demonstrate exactly this point.

Jesus is not trying to score a point against the religious hierarchy when he describes how first the Priest and then the Levite fail to stop to help the victim. And we should not jump in and automatically write them off as bad people. If that were the case the impact of their actions would be lessened. Jesus does not tell us why they fail to stop but several theories have been put forward. Maybe they fear the victim is dead and do not want to risk being made unclean and not be allowed to officiate for seven days by touching the body. In law, Leviticus 21.11 is unequivocal that a priest “shall not go where there is a dead body”

Maybe they fear it is a trap and the body was the decoy that would lure them into an ambush. Maybe the assailants are still around and they genuinely fear for their own safety. Perhaps they’d just rather keep going and pretend it never happened.

Whatever the reasons, it is a parable, and their actions illustrate a point. Jesus is illustrating to the lawyer that by strictly observing the letter of the law the Priest and Levite fell short of loving God and neighbour which was the criteria that our lawyer identified was needed to qualify for salvation. And of course, the warning is as true today as it was then. At some time in our lives we will all react in the same way – not wanting to get involved, not wanting to get our hands dirty, being too afraid to help or simply overwhelmed by the logistics of helping needy people or stopped by our mistrust and fear of being conned. Finding any number of reasons why not to get involved. But they are all real concerns in the world today and somehow, we have to acknowledge and do something about them.

Then we move to the next difficult and very uncomfortable learning point for the lawyer. We all know that Jews and Samaritans did not get on. If you recall last week Jesus was refused hospitality by a

Samaritan village because “his face was set toward Jerusalem” and you may remember James and John’s response in calling for Jesus to call down fire onto the village. The truth is that the Jews considered Samaritans to be half breed through inter marrying pagans and refusing to keep the purity laws. They were considered unfit for God’s service particularly since they had opposed the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4.2-5) and had established a rival temple on Mount Gerizim. They didn’t have a lot going for them!

You can imagine the discomfort of the lawyer as the story unfolds and shows the Samaritan not only going to the victim’s aid but caring for him and then even paying for further care at the inn. By the way, I’m now dropping the word ‘good’ because a) the Samaritan is never described as ‘good’ in the story and b) because it singles him out and implies that others were not good. Anyway, Jesus now sensing the lawyer’s discomfort moves to close the debate. “Now which of the three do you think seemed to be a neighbour to him who fell among robbers?” Jesus has subtly turned the lawyer’s own question back onto him. “He who showed mercy” acknowledges the lawyer but note that he still can’t bring himself to acknowledge the man as a Samaritan. But his admission admits that neighbour has now been defined not by race or creed but in terms of compassion and real need.

The lawyer is forced to acknowledge (in the story at least) that the boundaries he was keen to establish should not exist in cases of need and it follows therefore that the only restrictions or boundaries are self-imposed. “Go and do likewise” Jesus tells him, but this time there is no promise of the eternal life that the lawyer was seeking. Perhaps Jesus recognised that by being faced with the reality of the situation, the lawyer would be unable to rationalise or process it and would eventually reject it and fall back on old prejudices and the law to justify his viewpoint.

I said at the start that there might be a case for associating more readily with the lawyer. Like the lawyer we are all challenged with the love of God and of our neighbour that Jesus called for. But the sheer enormity of the concept is so global in nature that it is almost impossible to keep to all the time. The question for today is how many of the lawyer’s arguments and prejudices mirror our own either individually or collectively? We are human and almost from birth make decisions and judgements about people based on flimsy knowledge or evidence. Why do we like some people and not others? Sometimes there is no reason we just do. Why do so many people or groups annoy us? Even Jesus got angry with some people. And do we, like the lawyer look for or erect barriers and boundaries in our minds. We are certainly a society that likes to categorise and label people yet that very process can lead us to form strong opinions that are purely based on that labelling or worse on a preconception of the individual. For example, I overheard a comment the other day, delivered with total conviction and leaving no room for argument, that “all homeless people are drug addicts”. And of course, the more we say it the more it becomes the truth in our minds. Finally, like the lawyer I’m guessing that most of us are pretty good at finding reasons why not to do something, or to justify our opinions when challenged. And if we lose or look like losing the argument do we take our ball away and dismiss the other point of view. Well there’s very few of us perfect and I think we have a lot in common with the lawyer.

We are all human, and that means we all possess God’s gift of free will mixed up with that level of inconsistency that makes us individuals. And it is as individuals, as communities as countries that we need to rethink the “who is our neighbour” question, otherwise we are in real danger of missing the two main charges given by God, loving Him as ourselves and loving our neighbour. As hard as it is, we don’t really have the option to be selective. But we still do it. Amen