

Sermon for Sunday 10 July 2022 – The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

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Deuteronomy 30.9–14; Colossians 1.1–14; Luke 10.25–37

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, as we come to this familiar passage, would you, by the power of your Spirit, open our hearts and minds to hear and see afresh in Jesus name. Amen.

The Gospel reading for today, or the third reading being Morning Worship. It's probably up there in the top ten of the well known parables, it's probably up there with the Prodigal Son, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, or maybe better, the Parable of the Man Who Fell Among Robbers. Which was its early title. And I think that that's helpful because it removes some of the offensiveness of the title, the Good Samaritan. I'm seeing some puzzled faces here because maybe we don't think of that as offensive. But saying the Good Samaritan is like saying the other Samaritans aren't good. It's like saying 'The Good Immigrant' or 'The Good Politician.' It's okay, you are allowed to laugh in church! But this parable has been repeatedly ripped out of its context and misused. It's been used to say a variety of things that it doesn't say, or it's been used as a basis for saying something like I'm not a Christian, I don't believe in God, but I do like the teachings and I try to be like the Good Samaritan.

So let's do this parable not a disservice, but a service, and put it back in its context. A lawyer stands up to ask Jesus a question; to test him. Now, this might simply be the usual context of a rabbi teaching and somebody standing up and questioning the rabbi. This is what they did. It's a backwards and forwards question and answer. And the format of the questions and the answers might suggest that. But it also might have been an intention to trip Jesus up. We know by this point in Luke's gospel that the Pharisees have sent delegations to just check out what Jesus is doing.

Now, the lawyer is somebody who is versed in the Jewish Scriptures, in the Torah, in the law, possibly a priest, a Scribe, certainly. And he asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Luke using here the phrase 'eternal life' for salvation, for life in the age to come. Have you ever thought about the lawyer's question? [silence] All those blank faces? Are you, like many people who read this bit and we jump to the parable that we know so well. But I think it's a misguided question; it's not the question I might have asked. He's asking, what must I do to inherit eternal life? But inheritance is not something you earn. Inheritance is a gift. He's making a category mistake with his question. In our reading from Colossians. Paul said, it's the Father who has enabled us to inherit not anything that we do ourselves.

But Jesus doesn't challenge the question, but he answers it with a counter question, 'What is written in the law?' And again, this is fairly standard. A rabbi would be asked a question and he would throw it back to his students, 'How do you read it? What do you read in the Lord,.' The lawyer, as Jesus had done on other occasions, quotes Deuteronomy 6.5, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and strength,' and adds in 'with all your mind.' And that was echoed in our reading from Deuteronomy today. He adds to it Leviticus 19.80, 'You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour, your fellow citizen, as yourself.' And Jesus

responds, 'Right answer, gold star, go to the top of the class.' Oh, and by the way, you don't just need to know the right answer, you need to go and do the answer too.

Now, at this point, I need to make something clear. Jesus is not advocating a works gospel. The idea of that being that it's what we do, that means that we can obtain eternal life, that our love for God is a response to his love for us. And our love of neighbour is a demonstration of that response of loving God.

Yesterday, as you came in you may have seen some confetti in the churchyard, we had a wedding here and the couple chose to have a reading from 1 John 4. This is what John says: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.' It goes on, 'Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.' Our love for God, our love for neighbour, is a response to God's love for us. It's not a means of obtaining God's love.

I want you to imagine how the lawyer felt at that moment. He'd asked Jesus a question. Jesus had asked a counter question. The lawyer had answered correctly, and he'd been told that the answer to his question is the answer he'd given, but he must live out the answer. Now, I'm very puzzled why the lawyer didn't ask, 'How do I love God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind? How is that even possible?'

I know for myself, if somebody said to me, have you always loved God with your whole heart, soul, strength of mind? I'd have to say no. And I'd have to say, I think it's nigh on impossible. But he doesn't ask that question. Instead, he tries to justify himself. That means make himself look right. He asks, 'Who is my neighbour' or 'Who is my fellow citizen?' Who is it that I must love in response to God's love for me?

And I just wonder whether the lawyer is thinking, well, I can't love everybody. So I've just been told that I've got to love God and love neighbour, and I've got to do it fully if I am going to inherit eternal life. So how can I limit what I have to do so I've got more chance of achieving it? Do you follow my thought process, or am I just barking up the wrong tree here?

Because if I'm told I've got to do something and I think it's difficult, I am going to try and limit what I have to do to make it more achievable. Or maybe he's trying to test Jesus again. Maybe he's hoping to exploit the ambiguity that there is in Leviticus 19, where the neighbour is just the fellow Israelite, no one else, or except resident aliens who have said that they want to accept God's covenant. But it's the immediate connections.

Do we sometimes do the same? I can be a good neighbour to my family and my friends. Maybe a slightly wider circle of associates, maybe the people from the same church as me. Or maybe if I must folk from other churches. Jesus responds to this question with a parable, and remember that a parable is a story that, whilst it may have some sort of real life truth in it, it is tailored to the point that the person using it is trying to make. So we mustn't stretch it too far. But first, a quiz. You ready?

You fill in the gap. The good, the bad and the... Planes, trains and... Even the choir got that one. Father, Son and... A Priest, a Levite and... Wrong.

As I often say, if we are going to understand scripture, we need to hear it as the original hearers would have heard it before we make application. The people hearing Jesus saying 'Priest, Levite...' their next thing in three would have been an Israelite, because they were the three categories of Israel - you were either part of the Aaronic Priesthood, part of the Levitical family, or you were an Israelite. They would have been shocked. Quite often with Jesus' parables, he starts with something that they expect and it takes a twist. The good, the bad and the ugly; planes, trains, and automobiles; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Priest, Levite and Israelite, but no - Priest, Levite and Samaritan.

Remember, the Jewish people and the Samaritans just did not get on. They were siblings that had got separated. At best, they disliked each other, at worst, they despised each other, and there was violence between them. It would be like saying, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a diocesan bishop, and you would expect next the archdeacon, and instead Archbishop of Canterbury, diocesan bishop and a terrorist. That is how offensive it would have been.

So, having had that quiz, let's strip away some of the wrong points that are often made about this parable. The Priest and the Levite, it's often said, have the excuse of not intervening because of concern over purity laws. They were going about their duties to the temple. No, sorry if I'm destroying things that you've held onto for years, the Priest and the Levite were travelling down from Jerusalem to Jericho, that means they were going away. They'd maybe been performing priestly duties, they were now finished and leaving, walking on that 17 miles road to Jericho, possibly with the Temple taxes notorious for bandits.

But even if there was a concern for the purity laws of not touching bodies, there's a caveat to allow the Priest and the Levite to help someone in need, or deal with a neglected corpse. And for what it's worth, the purity laws didn't even apply to the Levites. Might have applied to the priests, but didn't apply to the Levites. So this is not a get out for them, for their obligations to do the right thing. And the folk who were listening, would have been horrified that the priest and the Levite didn't stop to help.

And then Jesus introduces this third character, not the expected Israelite, but one of the enemy, the Samaritan. It's the Samaritan who shows mercy and helps, not what the heroes would have expected - they might have expected the Samaritan went over to make sure the man was dead and to see if there was anything more he could steal. But it's this unexpected character in the story who is the one who acts as neighbour? Notice the change from what Jesus asks, from what the lawyer had asked. The lawyer had asked, 'Who **is** my neighbour?' Jesus asked, 'Who **was** the neighbour?'

And the lawyer's question isn't even answered in the parable. Instead, the parable answers his first question, 'How do we love?' It's an explanation of the answer to the lawyer's first question, 'How do I inherit eternal life? Love God, love neighbour. how?' We love by being a neighbour, by showing mercy; by showing mercy to those we come across who are in need. The lawyer tried to restrict what he needed to do by limiting who was his neighbour. And Jesus has flipped this on its head and said, no, it's not about who is your neighbour, it is about who will **you** be a neighbour to? To mangle the English grammar!

I'm going to leave you with a challenge, as Jesus did the lawyer. This week, the challenge is to pray to us, God, for an opportunity to express your love for God in response to his love for you by being a neighbour to somebody in need. Now, we didn't have time to unpack it this morning, but like the Samaritan, that might cost you time, effort and money, but we are called as God's people, in response to his love for us, to love God and to love our neighbour as a demonstration of that, and as the lawyer was made aware, the issue is not about who is my neighbour, but it is about us being a neighbour. Amen.