

Sunday 10th July 2022
Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 30: 9-14

NT: Colossians 1: 1-14

G: Luke 10: 25-37

"It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand" attributed to Mark Twain the American writer and humorist this quote would certainly apply to the parable of the "Good Samaritan" which we heard in our gospel reading. A narrative from Jesus that is so familiar that it has become part of our everyday language. The dictionary definition '*one who voluntarily renders aid to another in distress although under no duty to do so*' would appear to get to the heart of the story and seems to provide the response to the question that the lawyer asked Jesus 'who is my neighbour'.

Once again in this passage we move from a theological concept to practical actions driven by love rather than legal dogma. To have eternal life is to live in the presence of God. To do so is to be in a relationship with God sustained by love – a love that is complete, reaching into our innermost identity and reaching out to our fellow human beings. The story of the good Samaritan was a shocking story when first told because it spoke of the difference between decisions made out of fear and the one decision made out of love.

The lawyer is an expert in the law of Moses and tests the ability of Jesus the rabbi to interpret it. He wants to know how he can be sure that he will have a place in God's new world when it eventually arrives. Jesus refers him to the obvious source of authority. But how does he read Moses, when there are many opinions about what it means to be faithful to God, all with ancient roots? Sadducees see loyalty in their support for the Temple, even if that means compromising with Rome. At the opposite

extreme are Israelites of a more militant cast, for whom violence against Rome is the only way to cleanse God's holy land of foreign impurity. Pharisees and other like-minded groups apply the law to the details of everyday life and use it to highlight the boundaries around God's holy people. Meanwhile John the Baptist is drawing disciples by advocating a more broad-brush approach: Moses as a teacher of repentance, generosity, fairness and non-violence (Luke 3.7-14). Where do Jesus and the testing lawyer stand on this spectrum?

The lawyer brings together the two commandments that see the Law's intention as love for God and neighbour (Deuteronomy 6.5; Leviticus 19.18). By commending him, Jesus shows that they are both nearer to John the Baptist in the way they read Moses. The only way to be sure of a place in God's new order is to act lovingly in the world now: 'do this, and you will live' (v. 28). But the lawyer pursues the matter further. He wants to know what Jesus thinks about a hotly debated issue in his circle: 'who is my neighbour?' In other words, where do the limits of my obligation to love others lie?

Jesus' story about people on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho draws on well-worn stereotypes. The priest and Levite are devoted to a way of reading Moses that would keep them at a distance from the possibly dead victim. Should they come into contact with blood or a corpse, they will not be able to worship at the Temple (Numbers 19.11ff.). But the mixed-race Samaritan knows no such scruples. He sees only a person who needs help, rather than an inconvenience. Neither his nationality nor his religious status is a concern. All that matters is that he is cared for, whatever the cost, or risk to the Samaritan's own safety.

By including a parable with a Samaritan as its hero – surely a shock to Jesus' audience – Luke ensures that Jesus' story resonates with both Jews and Gentiles in his churches. The law of Moses certainly informs the life that God wills, but only when it

is read from the perspective of the victim and the compassionate outsider. Notice how Jesus' final question to the lawyer in verse 36 reframes the one that he asked (v.29). Not 'who is my neighbour?' but 'how can I be neighbour?' is the right response to Moses. Boundary-crossing compassion, however inconvenient or contaminating, makes people fit for the kingdom of God.

The call for compassion is not always convenient. For all the characters in Jesus' parable, the beaten-up traveller was an inconvenience. They could all claim that their reasons for being on the road took priority over helping the man out. But a truly compassionate response sees different priorities. The Samaritan is prepared to interrupt his journey without abandoning it. Jesus sees this as a sign of the way the world is reordered around his radical understanding of the will of God as other-centred love.

The story of the Good Samaritan is so familiar to those who have been around churches for a while that it is tempting to switch off from it. We know that we should be like the Samaritan — the stranger who was prepared to go out on a limb — and that we should condemn religious hypocrites like the priest and the Levite who pass by on the other side of the road. The message is simple, isn't it?

Maybe not — for starters, how many times do we pass people by? Maybe they're begging, or drunk or aggressive. We've all given such people a wide berth without waiting to find out their story. And sometimes (but not always) that is the sensible thing to do because we feel very vulnerable and are not sure if there is anything we can really do to help.

The chances are that if we had featured in the parable, we would have acted like the priest or the Levite. We would hurry on our way, not wanting to approach someone who looked as if they had been brawling, maybe thinking that we could get help sent

from the next town, or maybe worrying about our responsibilities at the other end of our journey and not wanting to make ourselves unable to perform them because we were ritually unclean.

Putting ourselves in the shoes of the priest or Levite underlines the remarkable generosity and openness of the Samaritan.

Jesus doesn't tell us parables just to make us instantly replicate the actions they speak about. He tells them to make us think and reflect about what the message says for us. The model for the generosity of spirit shown by the Samaritan is the love and mercy of God poured out so abundantly on us, with all our needs that others may not see. As we have received so we are asked to give, without thinking of the cost to us in terms of time and inconvenience.

As a man left for dead had his life transformed by the touch and care of the Samaritan, so our lives are daily being transformed by the glimpses we get of God's love and truth. And we are called to carry on this generous work of transformation by responding to the opportunities that present themselves to respond to needs big and small around us.

Fr Bill Addy