

**Sunday 13 July 2025**  
**The Fourth Sunday after Trinity**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Deuteronomy 30.9-14**  
**NT: Colossians 1.1-14**  
**Gp: Luke 10.25-37**

The parable of the Good Samaritan is so familiar that 'to be a good Samaritan' is a phrase that has passed into everyday speech. But who were the Samaritans and why does Jesus choose one to be the protagonist in this story? To answer that question, we have to step into a contested history.

The region of Samaria lay across what is now the Palestinian West Bank and part of northern Israel. According to the Samaritans' own traditions, they descend from the northern Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. They trace their genealogy to those who stayed in the land after Assyrian invaders took large numbers of people into exile in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

However, Jewish rabbinic sources dispute this. They claim that the Samaritans are of foreign origin, coming from a place that lies in modern day Iraq. The reasons for this disagreement go deep. The Samaritans claim they are true Israelites, and that they preserve the authentic teachings of Moses. In particular, they reject the later books of the Hebrew Scriptures and say that the only place God chose for his people to worship was Mount Gerizim. This means they reject what Kings David and Solomon did, which was to put the centre of worship in Jerusalem.

For centuries, there were competing Temples on Mt Gerizim and on Mt Zion in Jerusalem. Just over 100 years before Jesus was born, the Samaritan temple was destroyed by Jewish forces.

It is not surprising that relations between Jews and Samaritans were poor. Each accused the other of departing from God's revelation and the true site of worship. For the Jews, the Samaritans were foreigners at worst, the products of deviant inter-marriage at best. For the Samaritans, the Jews were apostates. It could hardly have helped matters that Samaritans were forced to worship in the rubble of their holiest site, knowing its destruction was caused by the Jews.

I hope all this background helps to explain why Jesus' choice of the Samaritan would have been so shocking to his audience. This is no random foreigner, or just anyone who might have been considered different or unclean. This was the other party in a bitter family dispute about inheritance, memory, land and sacred truth. Such things echo through the conflicts we see in our own day.

Bear in mind all this weight of conflict and division as we follow the story through. The first thing to note is how it starts: with a question you might expect asked of any rabbi. 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' asks the lawyer. Remember that this is not a question about getting into heaven or an afterlife. To borrow a phrase of James Allison, it is about what it means to 'live on the inside of the life of God'. Eternal life is a quality of life lived *now*; it is seeing as God sees, having one's heart moved as God's heart is moved. Jesus throws the question back to the lawyer, whose response is approved by Jesus. It shows what Jesus thinks is most essential in the Law. First, that we give the whole love of our heart, mind and body to God. Second, that we love our neighbour as ourself.

Already, we can see that Jesus is teaching us something: to worship anything other than God is to worship things – or ideas – that we have created. These things we have created stop us seeing other people as God's creatures. Other people are not seen as those loved by God, but as those who do or do not conform to our ideas.

To love God and to love one's neighbour are intertwined. You cannot separate them. As the writer of the letter of John says: how can you claim to love God, whom you cannot see, if you do not love the brother or sister you can see? Loving God means loving what God has created, seeing as God sees.

This also means loving ourselves: not in a selfish, grasping, deluded way, but as God loves us. Our love for others is rooted in a healthy love of self. We see *ourselves* as God sees us: as precious, beloved children, capable of love.

Something wonderful is contained within Jesus' answer. Loving God is not in competition with loving others or ourselves. It is not as if we have a finite stock of love, and if we give it to God we have less of it for anyone else. God is not a thing, an object, something or someone to crave and possess. God *is* love, free and boundless. To love God is to live within that love, to let it flow freely in and through us. It loosens the hold of the rivalry and suspicion we project on to others, often as a result of something broken and unloved in ourselves. When we love God, neighbour and self without fear, the vicious cycle of negative desires is laid to rest. This *is* eternal life.

OK: that sounds all very well in theory, but how does it cash out in practice? The lawyer wants to press for details. Who *is* my neighbour?

This is where Jesus' answer becomes so subversive. Remember that the man who is robbed is ignored by the Levite and the priest. Two things are worth bearing in mind here. First these are people who serve in the Jerusalem Temple, the very centre of Jewish worship. Second, we often read that they may have walked past the man for fear of possible ritual contamination – the man in the ditch is both half naked and possibly dead. However, this would not have been a valid reason for failing to help someone in dire straits. Added to this, the language used suggests they were walking in the same direction the victim had been going – *away* from Jerusalem. Their job in the Temple was done. Strict ritual purity was not an issue for them. In any case, the truth is that they just didn't want to see the man in the ditch. They didn't want to be put out. They feared that he would interrupt their life and possibly put them at risk too. But it is not easy to walk past someone like that. Physical distance helps: a wall, a fence; failing that, walking by on the other side. But what helps even more is dehumanisation. Better not to treat the man as a person, a brother, a fellow creature. He was, to use the language of one of the psalms, like a thing thrown away. A bit of rubbish in a ditch.

And then comes the Samaritan, who not only helps the man, he offers an open-ended practical and financial assistance. He tends the wounded body and hands it on to others to ensure care is maintained.

Think of the impact of these words. The servants of the Jerusalem temple walk on by. The one who rejects the Jerusalem temple stops to help. For his audience, the Samaritan is the impure one, the incomer, the mixed bloodline, the apostate from revelation and true worship. For the Samaritan, the Jews were the apostates and the ones who had destroyed the true Temple.

All these claims are swirling around: this story. Who truly belongs to the land? Who truly worships God? A history of suspicion, dispossession and violence courses along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and up to Samaria.

But the Samaritan does stop. He does not let himself get swept away by these stories. He does not let rivalry and revenge stop him from seeing what is in front of him: the bruised face and broken body of the victim. And seeing it, he cannot treat this man as a thing to be discarded. He sees him as God does.

The Good Samaritan can be seen as a story about how we are to go out of our way to help others in need. It is that, but it is so much more. Remember that the lawyer asked, who is my neighbour? Jesus ends the story asking who acted as a neighbour to the man beaten by robbers. The answer is: the one who helped him. It is a good answer, the right answer. But it is interesting that the lawyer did not say: the Samaritan.

Perhaps he could not bring himself to say it, to admit that it was the outsider and the heretic who was the one who did the right thing. But perhaps there is a more positive way of taking the lawyer's answer: that the one who helps is no longer confined by labels like Samaritan, priest, Levite, Jew, Gentile. The one who helps is simply a human being able to see as God sees: to see others not as things or threats, but as people made in God's image. Jesus is asked what we must do to live inside the life of God. His answer: we must see as God sees. This means more than doing kindnesses (though that's a good start!). It means challenging our whole way of seeing the world through rivalry, through labels, through histories of resentment and dehumanisation. Jesus calls Israel back to the essence of the Law. He calls them to remember what was already at the heart of their creation and their story of liberation.

It is a lesson that needs to be heard today. In Israel and Gaza, in Sudan and Congo, in places of poverty, persecution and racism – wherever the other is seen as less than human, a thing to be thrown away for the sake of an idol we have created. It is also a lesson that can resound in our own life, when we think of those whom we reject and avoid. And when we think of those parts of *ourselves* we avoid, the parts we try to discard or repress. They too need to be seen and loved.

In the end, says Jesus, we need to see the victim as our sister, as our brother – so that they can be a victim no longer. In the end, Jesus will become the victim of our human cruelty, fear and politics, taking all of that on himself. He will not respond with violence and vengeance, but with a love stronger than death. That love is pure gift and there is always more than enough for all.

At this table, alongside our sisters and brothers, let us taste that love and learn to see as God sees. See yourself as loved. See others as children of that same love. Look on Jesus, who shows us the wide open, defenceless heart of God, which never stops beating for us.

**Fr Steven Shakespeare**