

4th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 10, Year C)

Luke 10.25-37

Christ Church, Chelsea

10 July 2022

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Even today it can feel rather treacherous to take, following the example of the traveller in today's gospel, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The route heads out of Jerusalem past green olive groves. Soon after it crests one of the hills that surrounds the city. But then almost immediately the landscape turns to desert – no rain falls this side of the hill. And the four-lane highway twists and turns down the hillside as it falls vertiginously down, from Jerusalem's 2500 feet above sea level to Jericho's 700 feet below. One almost feels that danger lurks around every turn – though today that might be more to do with the quality of the local coach driver than a fear of bandits behind every rock.

The dangers of the route from Jerusalem to Jericho seem to have been known to travellers in Jesus's day. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that when he told this famous parable about a man, he set it on this road. And we can hardly not know this most-famous of biblical stories. A man on the road is brutally robbed. And while first a priest and then a Levite avoid the man and pass on by, it is a Samaritan – member of a religious group despised by the Jews – who rescues the man and cares for him.

'Go and do likewise', Jesus simply comments at the end of the story. But, as ever, the devil is in the detail. What does it mean to act like the Samaritan?

You can get a sense of the complication by considering how the parable has been taken up by modern politicians. Margaret Thatcher famously observed, very much in alignment with her economic policies, that 'no one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money

as well.’¹ Taking a different approach to the parable, in his 2015 speech on taking the leadership of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn spoke of his desire for a ‘society where we don’t pass by on the other side of those people rejected by an unfair welfare system’.² And, also in 2015, Hilary Benn argued that ‘we never should walk by on the other side of the road’, as he spoke in favour of the UK engaging in air strikes in Syria against IS. Though, as the comedian David Mitchell pointed out, Benn’s Samaritan goes rather beyond the original parable. He doesn’t just help the mugged traveller: he also volunteers to seek out and destroy the poor chap’s assailants. This is, Mitchell commented, the Good Samaritan as played by Charles Bronson.³

What, then, does it mean to ‘go and do likewise’? As these examples illustrate, the parable has been read in support of a whole range of – sometimes incompatible – positions. Does the robbed man simply represent whatever issue we think others should engage with? Does the Samaritan simply represent whatever we are doing as we seek to help others?

No, I would suggest. For note two intriguing clues in the use of language by Luke our gospel writer as he describes the Samaritan. First, when the Samaritan comes across the horribly injured man, Luke tells us that Jesus was ‘moved with pity’. That identical Greek word that speaks of deep compassion – literally, a moving of the bowels with emotion – occurs in two other places in Luke’s gospel. And both of the other times, it indicates compassion shown by Christ.⁴ Clue one!

The second clue comes at the very end of the story. Jesus asks the lawyer, his questioner, which of the three men was a neighbour to the robbed man. The questioner does not say ‘the Samaritan’. Instead, he simply replies, ‘The one who showed him mercy’. And, again, if we look for where ‘mercy’ is spoken of in Luke’s gospel, every time but one it is associated with an act of Jesus (and on the other time, that mercy is an act of God the Father). Clue two!

¹ Quoted in Nick Spencer, *The Political Samaritan*, p.58

² Quoted in Spencer, *Political Samaritan*, p.77

³ Spencer, *Political Samaritan*, p.81

⁴ The first is in Luke 7.13, in the story of Jesus’ raising of the widow’s son. The second is in Luke 15.20, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, to describe the response of the father (who represents God).

The Samaritan is deeply moved – like Jesus. The Samaritan is the one who shows the injured man mercy – like Jesus. The Samaritan is Jesus.

So, if we were to take the story as a whole, we could say that the lawyer asks Jesus the question, ‘who is my neighbour’. And Jesus gives a twofold answer. First, think of the Samaritan as Jesus, God incarnate. Like the Samaritan, God loves, rescues and cares even for those who, like Jews towards Samaritans, have despised and rejected him. And then, second, consider that the Samaritan is, at the same time, us. We are to ‘go and do likewise’ – like God in Christ, to love, rescue and care even for those who have despised and rejected us.

The various earlier examples of politicians referencing the parable risks giving the impression that it’s possible to draw on the parable to defend whatever course of action we like. But that’s simply not the case. Every moment of every day we make small choices. And each choice, each decision not to walk past on the other side of the road, is part of our whole life’s discernment of what it means for each of us to act faithfully.

It would be so much easier if doing ethics as a Christian involved a simple set of rules: do this, don’t do this, and so on. But as we see in the story of the Good Samaritan, it’s a more involved process than that. It’s a gradual working out of what it means to live in a christlike way – in accordance with the ways of God we see lived out in Jesus’s own life – in each part of our lives. That’s a complex thing. I still find it challenging to be aware that Christians from across the political spectrum – even if acting in ways I might very much disagree with – see themselves to be following the Samaritan’s example.

But there is one norm in this parable that we can’t avoid, however, much we try. The question that the lawyer poses to Jesus is ‘Who is my neighbour?’ And Jesus’s answer makes clear that my neighbour is not just my friends, or my family, or my colleagues. My neighbour is every single human being on this earth, past, present and future. I am to see the face of Christ in each individual.

And it is this fundamental principle of Christian life, I would suggest, that is both one of the hardest to live out *and* particularly under pressure in today’s

world. What is it to be a neighbour to the migrant? What is it to be a neighbour to those in countries far away who make our cheap clothes and toys? What is it to be a neighbour in support of the living conditions of all in our own boroughs? There is no simple answer to any of these questions. But we have to reject the temptation to do exactly as Jesus would not have us do, and to restrict our neighbourliness to those of our own nationality, or ethnicity, or demographic. Every human is our neighbour. We cannot faithfully live out this parable without having a concern for all. The Samaritan lives out the love of Christ in support even of the one who has hated him. Our responsibility is both clear and a lifelong question for us to live out: 'Go', says Jesus, 'and do likewise'.