

“Who is my neighbour?” (The Good Samaritan)

The Gospel according to Luke, Ch. 10, vv. 25-37

Lk. 10; v.36-37; “Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him”.

“Who is my neighbour?”

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the best known of Jesus’ parables, along with those of the Sower and the Lost Son (or Prodigal Son, as this story was traditionally known). It is well known even to many people who have no connection with the Church; so that the term “Samaritan” itself has become attached to organisations or individuals devoted to helping those in need – in Germany to an ambulance and rescue service, and in Britain to the organisation that provides anonymous telephone counselling to desperate people.

This parable differs from the other two I mentioned in the occasion that leads Jesus to tell the story: as an illustrative example in response to a concrete question from a person seeking to ‘test’ him, whatever that means exactly.

I have always had a bit of a problem with the name generally given to the story in English: the ‘Good’ Samaritan, as though being ‘good’ was an unexpected or unusual attribute for a Samaritan, who would normally be assumed to be a Bad Samaritan. But of course, that is a large part of the point of the story: Jesus is addressing the prejudices of those who expect precisely that.

So who were the Samaritans? To understand the division between Jews and Samaritans, we have to go back to Old Testament times, to the time when King David’s kingdom had broken into two: the larger, more northerly, kingdom of Israel, embracing ten of the Hebrew tribes, and the small southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem and still ruled by the House of David. In the 8th century before Christ the northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria and much of the population deported; and the King of Assyria resettled the land, now known as Samaria, with people of other nationalities themselves deported from various other parts of his empire [2Kgs 17,24]. As a result, Hebrew religion based on the Books of Moses entered into a strange coexistence with the

worship of gods the immigrants had brought with them from their home countries [2Kgs 17,29-32] and with elements of Baal worship that had survived from peoples who had inhabited Palestine before the Israelite conquest. This situation is described in the Second Book of the Kings [2Kgs 17,23-41]; and one can sense the puzzlement of the author as he describes it, unable to understand how the people of Samaria could on the one hand revere the Books of Moses, while on the other hand so blatantly disregarding the first of the Ten Commandments, ‘You shall have no other gods beside me’ [2Kgs 17,35-40]. By the time of Christ, or at least so my Bible commentary tells me, the Samaritans proudly insisted on their Israelite heritage, and their hybrid religion had become entirely Israelitic; yet despite the passage of several hundred years, the Jews refused to acknowledge this, and continued to regard Samaritans – all Samaritans – as foreigners, heretics and worshippers of false gods, that is to say, as Bad Samaritans. After all, it said in the Bible that they were ...

The main tangible element dividing the two peoples was that while the Jews insisted that the true worship of God could only centre on the Temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans, having long been excluded from participation in that worship, had built a temple of their own in Samaria which they were convinced was equally acceptable to God [Deut.27,12]. The situation as between Jews and Samaritans is well summarised in Chapter 4 of John’s Gospel. Jesus, travelling through Samaria, meets a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well and asks her for a drink. ‘The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”’, and the Evangelist adds in explanation, ‘For Jews do not associate with Samaritans’ [Jn.4,9]. The woman then addresses the factor underlying this hostility: ““Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem”” [Jn.4,20]. Jesus does not, of course, regard this woman as an opponent in any way, but simply as a human being; and in his answer he avoids taking sides: ‘A time is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such are the worshippers the Father seeks’ [Jn.4, 21-23].

To return to our story: the question asked by the ‘expert in the law’, ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’, was intended to ‘test’ Jesus, which must mean something like: to get Jesus to give answers or make statements which showed whether his views were in line with mainstream Jewish teaching. In answering, Jesus does as he often did – I am thinking in particular of the question as to whether it was lawful to pay tribute to the Roman emperor [Mt.22,17ff.): he turns the question round in such a way that it becomes a ‘test’ for the person who asked it. In our case, the initial question is relatively straightforward. It is similar and closely related to a question reported in the Gospels of Matthew [Mt.22,34ff.] and Mark [Mk.12,28ff.] as well: ‘Which is the greatest of the Commandments?’ And Jesus gives the same answer there as he gives the questioner in our story: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself.’ This answer was a thoroughly orthodox one that any priest or rabbi might have given; and so the questioner, feeling he has made himself appear rather foolish by asking such a simple question, seeks to ‘justify’ himself by picking out the one thing in the formulation where it might be possible to find some difference of opinion – namely the question of ‘Who is my neighbour?’ In orthodox rabbinical teaching, a ‘neighbour’ in this sense could only be a fellow Israelite and not a foreigner or non-believer. I like to think that the questioner, who as an ‘expert in the law’ would have been thoroughly familiar with this interpretation, himself suspected that Jesus was likely to call it into question, thereby giving rise to some exciting controversy.

Jesus sets about answering the question by telling a story in which we are presented with a person in need. A man attacked, beaten up and robbed, and left lying by the roadside, ‘half dead’. Then he presents us with three candidates for the role of ‘neighbour’ to the victim: a priest, a Levite (or temple assistant) – and a Samaritan. These three characters are of course carefully selected. The first and second are religious professionals; both, therefore, people of high standing and authority in society, who could expect to be looked up to by the general population. Priests and Levites were both members of the priestly tribe of Levi.

Priests were drawn exclusively from among the descendents of Aaron. Their role was principally that of administering rites and ceremonies in the Temple as laid down in the Law, in particular presenting to God the sacrifices through which individuals or the whole nation sought to atone for their sins and be reconciled to God. In this way, the priests were mediators between God and his people, which also included declaring the will of God to the people and exhorting them to live in accordance with the divine commands. Levites were members of the tribe of Levi not descended from Aaron. They fulfilled less central duties in the Temple, for example as doorkeepers, musicians, or performers of administrative and housekeeping tasks.

Thus the activities of both groups were concentrated on the ritualistic side of religion. In the books I have consulted I have found no reference to either priests or Levites being required to perform what we would nowadays call pastoral care, or 'good works', or anything that would include taking care of a wounded man found lying beside the road. But it simply can't be the case that their ritual duties free them from humanitarian ones – along the lines of 'I spend all my time and energy loving the Lord my God with all my heart and with all my soul', etc., 'so I have nothing left over with which to love my neighbour as myself.' This is the kind of ritualised righteousness that Jesus often criticises: he tends to reproach the Pharisees with it particularly, but I don't think those reproaches should be seen as applying exclusively to Pharisees: 'Woe to you,' he says according to Matthew: 'You give a tenth of your spices, but you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness' [Mt.23, 23]. Or according to Luke: 'You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. [...] But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you' [Lk.11,39/41].

I have read an attempt to explain why the priest and the Levite neglected their duty of neighbourliness towards the injured man. To perform their duties in the temple they had to keep themselves in a state of ritual purity in accordance with the Law of Moses: and physical contact with an unknown stranger lying bleeding in the dirt at the side of the road would certainly have rendered them

ritually impure – which would have been particularly inconvenient if they were just on their ‘way to work’, as it were. And they did not know whether the man might perhaps really be on the point of death, which would have made things even worse, since contact with a dead body was completely taboo for a priest. On the one hand, I can well imagine that there is here an implicit criticism of a ritual code whose provisions can lead to the neglect of those ‘more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness’. But on the other hand, I don’t think we really need to look for reasons why the priest and the Levite failed to act with compassion towards a person in need. We only need to ask ourselves what we would have done in this situation. Would we *really* – seriously now – have got out our first aid kits and gone to the assistance of the victim? Or would we not more probably also have chosen to ‘pass by on the other side’, pretending we hadn’t seen him – and Jesus makes it clear that they *were* pretending, putting in the words ‘when he saw the man’ both times. I could ask you to put up your hands if you have ever acted like that in a comparable, even if perhaps less extreme, situation. Don’t worry, I won’t ask you to; but I must admit that if I did, my own hand would have to be one of those that went up.

One benefit of the often annoying mobile phone is that many people nowadays, while still choosing to ‘pass by on the other side’, would at least send off an emergency call. But I don’t think that is morally quite equivalent to stopping and helping oneself. And in any case, the benefit could be outweighed by the fact that many mobile phone users are so absorbed that they would fail to notice an injured man lying by the road – even if they weren’t ‘on the other side’.

Anyway, for whatever reason, our wounded traveller is still lying by the road with no-one to help him. And then: along comes the Samaritan. He doesn’t need to worry about ritual purity: as a “foreigner”, he is by definition outside the ritually pure community, and no-one – I mean, no-one among the people listening to Jesus telling the story, including the “expert in the law” who asked the question – would have doubted that status. And more than that: none of them would have expected that it would be precisely ‘this foreigner’, as Jesus himself referred to a Samaritan on another occasion [Lk.17,18], who would take pity on a

Jew in this way. As ‘Jews do not associate with Samaritans’, why should a Samaritan associate with a Jew, especially one lying half dead by the roadside? – It would not even be necessary to consider whether the Samaritan was a follower of the religion of Israel, able to claim to ‘love the Lord your God’: for even if he was, the listeners would automatically assume that he practised his religion in the wrong way, or at the wrong place, so that it didn’t count. If Jesus had asked earlier in the story, after introducing the three passers-by, which of them was most likely to help the man in need, no doubt the whole stock of prejudices would have come pouring out. A Good Samaritan? Impossible! As I said earlier, every Samaritan was by definition a Bad Samaritan; some might even have gone as far as to hold that ‘The only good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan.’ Yet this Samaritan not only uses his oil and wine to tend the man’s wounds; he even spends his own money to ensure that he is well looked after – and that, as Margaret Thatcher once remarked, without even trying to reclaim his expenses from Social Security.

And in this way it is the Samaritan, who has himself no doubt often been a victim of prejudice and discrimination when journeying through Jewish territory, and not the priest or the Levite with their high social standing and high moral pretensions, who fulfils the second half of the ‘greatest of the Commandments’, to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. But even then, when Jesus asks the questioner ‘Which of these three was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’, or, to put it the other way round as the questioner originally did, ‘Which of them sees a neighbour in the injured man?’, he cannot bring himself to actually say ‘The Samaritan’, but tries to hide his prejudice behind the evasive answer, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ And so the answer to the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ is of course not the person who lives next door to me; but nor is it necessarily a person who belongs to my own community, my own nationality, my own religion or my own ‘culture’ or ‘race’. It is any person in need, but especially a person whose need I am in a position to relieve in a particular situation. As the hymn we will sing in a minute puts it: ‘When I needed a neighbour, were you there?’

Thus as I said at the beginning, Jesus turns the question intended to ‘test’ him into a test for the questioner. Because the story does not end with the admission by the questioner that it was the Bad Samaritan who correctly identified a neighbour, and in doing so fulfilled ‘the greatest of the Commandments’ by allowing his love of God to be displayed in his pity for a suffering human being. No: the story ends with Jesus’ instruction: ‘Go and do likewise’. For as God says through the prophet Hosea [Hos.6,6], ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings’; and it is on this quotation that Jesus bases his criticism of the Pharisees I talked about earlier [Mt.9,13].

I doubt if it is really necessary to spend much time in this sermon making the Bible story ‘relevant’ by explaining how it can be applied to our everyday life today. I hope that many of you, while listening to me, will have seen in your mind’s eye neighbours, near or far, crying out for help. Perhaps it was an old person in your street, who can no longer get out of the house to go shopping; perhaps you recalled the images we have seen in the media of the destruction caused by the hurricane in the Bahamas, and wondered who will be a neighbour to the people who have lost their homes; or perhaps you thought of the Bolivian peasants, whose struggle against a greedy and unfeeling land-owning class is reflected in the music this morning. Or you may have thought of refugees in unseaworthy boats, terrified of drowning, and of a little boy lying drowned on a beach; and of those people, those true Samaritans, who are trying to prevent this happening over and over again. To many people in many countries, the refugee who arrives among us, having barely escaped with his life, and perhaps with the loss of his family and friends, is nevertheless the Bad Refugee: the criminal, the rapist, the person who cheats the Social Security fund, or even worse, the terrorist on behalf of another religion. Unquestionably there will indeed be a few of these among the new arrivals, who need to be detected and prevented from doing harm; but fortunately, many will reject the generalisation of these prejudices, and will discover in the newcomer the Neighbour who needs my help, but who may also become a Neighbour to me, prepared to help me when I am in need.

And a final thought. When we see, as we often do see, though that very familiarity may prevent us from really, truly seeing it, a man, bleeding, half dead, not however lying at the side of the road, but hanging on a cross: can we be a neighbour to him? Indeed we can: he even told us how. ‘They will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go and visit you?”’ The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”’ [Mt. 25,37-40].

Let us go and do likewise.