

Online Reflection July 10th 2022 The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Luke 10:25-37

A man and his wife were awakened at 3:00 am by a loud pounding on the door. The man gets up and goes to the door where a drunken stranger, standing in the pouring rain, is asking for a push. "Not a chance," says the husband, "it is 3:00 in the morning!" He slams the door and returns to bed.

"Who was that?" asked his wife. "Just some drunk guy asking for a push," he answers. "Did you help him?" she asks. "No, I did not, it is 3:00 in the morning and it is pouring rain out there!"

"Well, you have a short memory," says his wife. "Can't you remember about three months ago when we broke down, and those two guys helped us? I think you should help him, and you should be ashamed of yourself!"

The man does as he is told, gets dressed, and goes out into the pounding rain. He calls out into the dark, "Hello, are you still there?" "Yes," comes back the answer. "Do you still need a push?" calls out the husband. "Yes, please!" comes the reply from the dark.

"Where are you?" asks the husband. "Over here on the swing," replies the drunk.

It's a typical three-part joke with stock characters: *The Wife*, *The Husband*, *The Drunk*. The story of the Good Samaritan is structured very like a joke, and like a joke the people aren't given names, they're given labels. We have *The Lawyer* who tests Jesus. And in the story Jesus tells, as well as the basic character, *The Man*, the main characters are: *The Priest*, *The Levite*, and *The Samaritan*.

If someone tells you they are a lawyer, how do you react? How do you label lawyers? Possibly rather unfairly? Well in Luke's gospel, you might say the lawyer conforms to the stereotype. He's cross-examining Jesus, he wants to test him: 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He and Jesus agree on the answer: total love for God and for our neighbours. But the lawyer doesn't know when to stop talking: he wants to tie things down a bit more, set the boundaries a bit more clearly. 'How do you define neighbor?' he asks, and that provokes the story.

We can if we think about it, feel a bit snifty about the lawyer. You can imagine the disciples around Jesus prickling a bit while this is going on: 'come on sunshine, you asked your question, the master's given you a good answer, now be on your way. You're just showing off now!' But actually, even if the lawyer was asking only for effect, he's got a good point.

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.' But how does that actually work? It's a bit like saying to the England Rugby team at the moment, 'just play better than the other team.' That's easy to understand but actually doing it's not that simple.

So, by asking 'who is my neighbour?' the lawyer isn't being as picky as we might think, or going for a cheap effect. Jesus, the disciples, the lawyer, the crowds, everyone involved, was living in a society where religious laws interacted with social customs and traditions, notions of family, hospitality, honour and shame, to produce a complicated world of do's and don'ts. It's easy for us to forget that, just as it's easy to forget how radical Jesus could be even by doing something that we might take for granted: talking to a woman at a well, touching someone with an illness, letting Martha's sister Mary sit at his feet like a male disciple. In a world full of taboos, the lawyer asks a pretty good question.

Jesus answers him with the parable of the good Samaritan. Good Samaritan is a label we take for granted –aren't all Samaritans good? But for Jesus' audience it would be deeply shocking. Jews and Samaritans really hated each other. Samaritans were traitors, non-Jews. A 'good' Samaritan would be a contradiction in terms, like a peaceful terrorist or a cheap Rolls-Royce.

Anyway, while the good Samaritan is the unlikely hero of the story, I wanted to think about the other two characters, the Priest and the Levite. We are horrified by them, aren't we? They walked on by! How terrible! How could they? On one level, Jesus tells the story to show that religious rules can sometimes get in the way of doing what God wants: both were going up to perform their duties at the temple in Jerusalem, which was a big event in both of their lives: touching what might well have been a dead body would have rendered them ritually unclean, and prevented them from carrying out their religious tasks, the most important thing to them: what could be higher than the worship of God?

In our 21st century setting, we can see none of the religious reasons that both these figures would have struggled with: all we can see is their callous

neglect of a vulnerable person in need. But would we, enlightened modern people have done any better?

I came across a rather chilling story from the US that hints at a worrying answer to this question. In April 2010 New Yorkers were shocked after at least 25 people walked past a homeless man bleeding to death in the street and failed to come to his assistance.

Shocking footage of the death of Hugo Tale-Yax, a Guatemalan aged 31, was captured on CCTV cameras in the Jamaica area of Queens. The video showed pedestrians walking and cycling past the man during the course of more than an hour as he lay in a pool of blood on the pavement.

The CCTV footage showed that several people walked by. They looked down at Tale-Yax but failing to stop. At one point someone could be seen taking a picture of him on their mobile phone. It was not until 7.23am, more than an hour after the victim collapsed, that emergency services were called.

What makes it even worse is that it looks like Hugo Yale Tax was himself attacked as he acted as a good Samaritan, coming to the rescue of a woman who was being attacked, but being himself stabbed as a result.

It's a depressing story. The Guardian newspaper website asked its readers if they would stop in similar circumstances. The answers were very interesting: probably two-thirds of the people who replied said that they wouldn't. Most of them gave the same reason: fear. If you see someone lying down, apparently injured, how do you know if he really needs help? He might be a mugger, waiting to trick you. He might be drunk or on drugs and might turn violent. It might not be safe to linger there. It's horrible, but it's safer not to get involved.

And that made me think, the good Samaritan story's become too comfortable with us. We know it too well. It loses any power to change us.

In our villages, we tend to know our neighbours. We can help them and they can help us. The other year, I managed to lock myself out of my house. I could see my keys through the letterbox on the hall table. I tried everything I could to reach them. I pushed my arm through the letter box as far as it would go, and using a branch I found in the garden I managed to get the keys near to the door. But half an hour later I was still locked out. Several people had walked past without commenting on the sight of a man desperately trying to break into a house (so much for neighbourhood watch).

Finally, my opposite neighbor Tom came out, and using a handy gadget he had in his garage (he has everything in his garage) I finally retrieved my key. We probably all have similar stories. I hear all sorts of good stories from our villages of neighbours helping each other when things go wrong.

But Jesus expands the concept of neighbourliness. Stopping to help a wounded man was a risk for anyone in bandit country, never mind the religious purity laws. Stopping to help a Jew when you're a Samaritan, in bandit country is even worse. If people saw the two of you together and found out who you were, they might assume you'd attacked him yourself. Stopping, helping, taking the wounded man to an inn – all these were huge risks for the Samaritan, the kinds of risks that might actually be too much for me, if I was there.

But every time we step out, we take a risk. The lawyer wanted to know where our boundaries should lie. It's the same sort of question that we ask ourselves in many practical situations. Jesus' answer is radical and it's uncomfortable. It means stepping outside of the safety zones that our status and privilege may give us. It means refusing to be exclusive, refusing to hide behind rules if those rules cut people off from God's love. The lawyer asks Jesus his questions as Jesus is travelling from the safety of Galilee to Jerusalem, where he knows that he will face suffering and death. But that's the reaching-out faith that Jesus calls us to follow too. The good Samaritan provides us with a handy label, a way to remember that this is what the 'good fruit', 'the good works' that Colossians talks about, might look like in practice. Sometimes we get it right. Thank God for all the good stories as well. For the times we ourselves have stopped and helped. For the work of all those who go onto the streets and try to help people; for Street pastors, for homeless charities, for the modern Samaritans on the end of the phone, and for many others.

I know there is a lot of the priest and the Levite in my own make-up. But I also know I'm called to follow Jesus, beyond my own neighbourhood, my own comfort zone, because in the end that's the only journey that will lead me into life, life in all its fullness.

To close with, a short prayer for the journey:

You are called to follow Jesus closely.
With Him you will take the road
up to Jerusalem,
the city of suffering and glorification.
With Him you will give everything

that the Kingdom may come.

On this road you are called
to be the least of all and not master,
to carry other people's burdens
and not lay your own on them,
to give freedom instead of taking it,
to grow poor in order to make others rich,
to take the cross upon yourself
thus bringing joy to others,
to die in order that others may live.
This is the mystery of the gospel
And there is no purpose in endless talk about it.
Be silent – for it will be true and genuine
only if you practise it.

So keep Jesus Christ before your eyes.
Don't hesitate to go anywhere He leads you;
don't stay where you are and don't look back,
but look forward with eagerness to what lies
ahead.
Amen.

-Phil