

The Good Samaritan Luke 10. 25-37

This is terribly basic. Everyone knows the story of the Good Samaritan. Of course, there were three Samaritans, the good, Samaritan, the bad Samaritan and the indifferent Samaritan... (just checking). Or the two Irishmen in the New Testament, Sam O'Haritan and his brother-in-law Nic O'Demus.

I remember this story from as far back as I can remember any Bible stories, from the days of Sunday School and Uncle Tom and the sand tray, and the cut-out cardboard figures with which the stories were re-enacted.. The story raised questions then, it raises questions now. For this is a real slippery fish of a tale, a brilliant piece of parabolocity. Perhaps the best known of all parables, it has succeeded in redeeming the name of the Samaritans worldwide - one now associates them with the words 'good'; the phrase 'passing by on the other side' is also lodged in our consciousness. A story with impact! With me, the first questions it raised, way back then around 1953, were coloured by the ecclesiastical setting I was reared in, the Salvation Army. What disturbed me was that the Samaritan, who we were assured was 'good', had taken the man to an Inn. Inns were bad. And he had poured oil and wine into his wounds. Why had he carried wine, which was bad? OK, perhaps it was for external use only.... Oil was not that easy either; did donkeys use oil? Did he need to stop for a quick roadside service and decoke?

Later on, in the late sixties or seventies, I heard the Riding Lights version of this parable, the 'Parable of the Good Punk Rocker' - the man on the train from London to York who fell amongst football fans, who was ignored by a vicar and a social worker, and befriended by the leader of the Dreggs punk band.....

So how could we act this out today? Who could we put in the two main roles? Can I have volunteers? If we keep it current and in church, we could have a hard-line conservative and a gay American bishop.....

Fast forward to the present. Trying to read up a few commentator's thoughts has been instructive. I owe most to Tom Wright, current Bishop of Durham. Basically, I have **three serious sermons** for you, and a fourth slightly tongue-in-cheek one thanks to a Christian web site, inevitably American, which advertises itself as one of the top 100 Christian websites. This one uses the parable to unlock the date of the Second Coming.

To start with the basics. **Sermon one**, and although I start with it, it is not an easy one, not for me anyway. A man was lying, beaten up and near to death, beside a desert road. A priest had passed by on the other side, then a levite. It is easy to blame them; but I think about my own reaction when suddenly confronted by some sort of emergency which is really nothing to do with me. Suddenly you just happen to be near someone else's crisis. The urge to pass by is very strong indeed, to look around and see if there is someone else coming, who will be far better qualified than you to deal with it.. I have been there. It's like standing at mid on when a skier is hit straight at

you - the desperate pleading look around, surely there is some other fielder near who has time to run in and catch this thing. Its partly cowardice, partly a very real conviction that the other person will handle the situation far better than you can. The priest had a real excuse, if the man was dead, as he may have looked to be, any physical contact would render him unclean, and in need of ritual cleansing; it would really interrupt his God-given tasks. There was also danger - perhaps the injured man was a decoy, with robbers hiding behind the boulders ready to leap on would-be helpers.... The Levite had probably seen the priest go by - and if the priest did not choose to get involved, why should he?

All these are excuses, natural understandable excuses, but none of them are viable. Jesus does not allow us excuses...

Sermon two is rather deeper and even more radical. To understand its impact, we need to go back to the context in which Jesus told the story. A lawyer had put him on the spot; most commentators think that this was not a casual enquiry, but a deliberate attempt to get Jesus to say something which could be used in evidence against him. The first question was a standard one - what must I do to inherit eternal life? . Jesus, as often, simply turned it back on the questioner - what do you think? The answer was OK, Jesus said so. Fifteen all. The lawyer would not leave it there, he did not want to miss his chance - so he asks Jesus to define who the neighbour really is. Now Jesus might say something heretical.... but this is where the slippery fish story comes in. If he had just said 'Your neighbours include Samaritans' - the group you despise the most- that would have been too easy; that is what the lawyer was waiting for. Instead he told the story; it was not a virtuous Jew who helped an injured Samaritan, but, far more hard to handle, the Samaritan who helped the Jew. At the end Jesus asks 'who turned out to be the neighbour? Priest, Levite or Samaritan'. The lawyer is suddenly on the back foot - 'the one who showed mercy' - notice he dare not say the word 'Samaritan'. 'Go and do the same' says Jesus, show mercy. But there is a deeper message rumbling underneath, shaking the foundations of the whole world of Judaism; God's concern was not confined to them, grace was for everyone, including the most despised group around. And that message is still the only answer to a divided world; modern-day Jews and modern-day Samaritans (I believe the Palestinians can claim to be their direct descendants) are not the world's best example of neighbourliness. We still have this terrible problem of divided societies; Ian Paisley was on the radio a couple of weeks ago insisting that in 'dialogue' with republicans he would never use their names, simply point at them if he wanted them to speak. And he calls himself a Christian....so who is going to point the finger at Moslems or anyone else? Again, I am afraid Jesus does not allow any compromise, human beings are our neighbours. Let John Wesley say it:**Let us renounce that bigotry and party zeal which would contract our hearts into an insensibility for all the human race, but a small number whose sentiments and practices are so much our own, that our love to them is but self love reflected. With an honest openness of mind let us always remember that kindred between man and man, and cultivate that happy instinct whereby, in the original constitution of our nature, God has strongly bound us to each other.**

Then **sermon three**, and the one I had not really been aware of before. The allegorical interpretation. Do you like allegories? Do yours get past 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'. That allegories can be handled in some pretty loopy ways should not discourage us from it. One allegorical interpretation of this parable is the one I came across on that website I mentioned. It is a tale of two cities -Jerusalem the place where men meet God, where heaven is open, from which the traveller, fallen mankind, journeys (downhill all the way, of course) to Jericho, city of the harlot,'a picture of an end-times nation, place, way of life and thinking' (ignoring the fact that the harlot in question, Rahab, was actually a 'good harlot', but that is another story.... The thieves are the devil and his demons, the wounded man is tended by Jesus, the Good Samaritan, and is taken on a donkey -symbol of kingship - to an inn. The innkeeper is God.. The Samaritan leaves two days wages - and this is the key to the whole story. With God, we know, a day is a thousand years; the interpreter concludes that God's work, giving house-space to fallen mankind, will be complete in two thousand years (which he takes as from the date Jesus first independent visit to the temple at the age of 12) so history will wind up with the Second Coming in 2012. QED.

I think this is a good example of how not to use the Bible, looking for secret readings and information on a subject that Jesus has directly told us even he has no knowledge of. But the allegorical interpretation is much bigger than this; it was very popular in the medieval church, and preached on by St Augustine, who also read one or two odd details into it - St Paul was the innkeeper in his version, and his payment was the counsel of staying celibate..Jericho was the moon, because 'it signifies our mortality, in that it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies.

But look at the main thrust of the allegory. The story is set on the Jerusalem to Jericho road; the road Jesus is himself about to embark on. Jesus is really very like the Good Samaritan. - the Jews actually called him 'Samaritan' as a term of abuse, and he was rejected and despised, just like the Samaritans. The beaten-up man sprawled in the gutter is mankind, all of us, after the devil has given us a going over. That too is clear enough. The priest and the Levite passing by on the other side signify that the Old Testament faith has failed. Maybe all ecclesiastical establishments, as establishments, will in the long run fail? - in passing by on the other side. The oil and wine poured on the wounds are symbolic of sacraments, of temple worship - oil in anointing, wine now in its New Testament interpretation as the blood of Christ.

This all rings true, to me anyway. So in a few short verses we have an incredible multi-layered little story, the Gospel in a nutshell, teasing our minds, worming its way through our critical faculties, and teaching us:

- (1) How we should act
- (2) How we should regard others.
- (3) .. and behind it all a picture of the radical religion-shattering action of God that makes this all possible, all there in a few lines.

These really are words that hover half an inch above the page and glow brightly

enough to illuminate the whole room. And yet even the level one interpretation, that of stopping to help the fallen, is one we stumble and balk at, let alone changing our attitudes to seeing all humankind as neighbours, or properly taking on board the behind-the-scenes story of how God himself came into our world.

In these talks we are supposed to underline an application that is especially relevant to us, here, now, Stepping Stones January 2004. Which one will it be? The basic Gospel story; do we all know that well enough? Our attitude towards unpopular social groups? There aren't too many of those in Corbridge and Riding Mill; the fact is that by our affluence we manage to live in an area where most people are more or less like us, quite safe from the struggling groups on the fringe of society; they can't afford to come here. So maybe prejudice is currently removed somewhat from our realm of temptations. What about passing by on the other side; do we ever make excuses when faced with a time demand from a needy, maybe undeserving, person? This may come nearer home. Some excuses come too readily to mind, quite worthy and reasonable excuses; I am too busy with my job, or doing things with my family... does Jesus allow these as reasonable excuses? He says some quite harsh, unreasonable things about even good things that are allowed to get in the way of the best... this is where I begin to feel uncomfortable and want to change the subject. How about you?

To end up back with the story. Jesus could have continued the parable a little further. Here are two possible endings.

(1) Traveller recovers, overwhelmed with gratitude, and decides to do something about it. He finds a Jewish-Samaritan friendship association, publicises his story which becomes an award-winning heart-warming film and then a block-busting west-end (west bank?) Show ending in a chorus line of Jews and Samaritans holding hands and singing 'you're never alone with another human being'. The original Samaritan rides into the sunset astride a brand new turbo-charged V8 donkey....

(2) This is what one commentator suggests might have happened. The traveller recovers, then finds he has been rescued by a hated Samaritan; such was the social climate at the period, that he and his family actually turn on his benefactor, to demonstrate the purity of their religion. Religious hatred over-rides all other human emotions. Then the ultimate self-destruction takes place - the rescued destroys the rescuer, the saved turns on his saviour. It makes no sense at all, but this is the dark strand woven into human nature that the biologists cannot explain. For, stepping into the allegory again, or into the real story - the tale of the Good Samaritan who told the tale of the Good Samaritan - that is actually what happened. But even that, of course, was not the end.