



Sermon

No By-Passing!

Luke 10:25-37

10th July, 2022

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In today's gospel reading, Jesus is being tested by an expert in the law of Moses. The question was a common question in Jewish debate and thought: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus answers as he so often did by asking a question. That was a familiar mode of instruction for rabbis. "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"

Again no surprises there, this is where they would expect to go for the answer. So the man answers his own question quoting from the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

He adds to that a quote from Leviticus 19:18,

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD."

Jesus affirms that if he did this, he would have life.

Now the man is uncomfortable with this answer. Luke says he desired to justify himself. He wants to make himself alright. There's no wriggle room on the command to love God, but just who is my neighbour? In other words, where can I draw the line in this loving others bit?

So Jesus tells the story we heard.

A man travels down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and is attacked by robbers. No surprise there – it was notoriously dangerous. The road descends 3,300 ft in 17 miles. Men lived and hid in the caves either side of the winding and twisting road and could easily ambush any traveller. It was so dangerous that it was nicknamed "The Way of Blood."

So the man is set upon by robbers, beaten up, stripped and left for dead. As he lies there, along comes a Jewish priest.

What passes through his mind as he sees the body lying by the road? Jesus doesn't tell us. He makes not excuse or explanation.

It is worth noting, however, that under the Law, one was made unclean by touching a dead body.

Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days.

So if the man were in fact dead, a Jew would be ceremoniously unclean by touching him. For priests it was stricter:

A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother...

So the priest and the Levite might well reason that if they investigated and then found the man was dead, then they would be unclean and unable to perform their temple duties. However, neither the lawyer nor Jesus offer that excuse for them.

Before we left England, I was walking along part of Hadrian's wall with my son and a friend of his. We were covering some rough ground with the boys ahead of me by about 30 metres. As I ran down a steep bit, my ankle turned and I came down heavily on it, twisting my ankle. I stumbled on down the slope and fell flat on my face on the ground. As I lay there, winded, with my ankle screaming pain signals at me, I saw a man walking towards me on the path. He walked right past me about 5 metres away and did not even look at me. I lay there, looking at him, thinking, "Aren't you going to see how I am?" I did not yet know whether it was a strain or a sprain or possibly a break. We were only about half a mile from the road but it would have been very difficult to get back to the car by myself. Knowing that I had only to shout for the boys to come back to me, I let him go without comment – but I found it incomprehensible that he did nothing, even knowing the boys were close. How much more would a seriously wounded man alone in a dangerous place feel the neglect of the two who passed by?

In contrast to the first two Jewish travellers, the third person on the scene is a Samaritan, not an ordinary Jew – Jesus isn't making a clerical-lay contrast. He is a foreigner and not just any foreigner but one who was particularly despised by the Jews.

You might remember the gospel reading two weeks ago, mentioned Jesus and the disciples encountering a Samaritan village which did not receive Jesus. James and John rather enthusiastically suggested calling down fire on the village, but Jesus rebuked them. That perhaps gives us an idea of how strong was the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans.

The problem was that the Samaritans were a mixed race people who kept some of the law of Moses but in an impure manner. When the Northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian empire, they followed their normal policy of displacing conquered peoples. So the Jews were deported elsewhere and other conquered people were brought in to populate the land. In fact, the people there ended up as a mixed race, of Jewish and pagan gentile interbreeding following a corrupt form of the Jewish religion. The resulting feeling between them might be similar to modern day Palestinian-Jewish relations or current Ukraine-Russian relations.

So Jesus casts the goody of the story as the most disliked category of person – different race, different faith and from a hatred people group.

I remember, once, trying to get back from Featherston to Auckland. I planned to take the train back to Wellington and so by overnight train to Auckland. When I got to the station, I found that the train I had been told to expect did not run on Saturdays. There was no further public transport that day! So I decided to try to hitch-hike to Wellington. After a succession of cars had gone by, as I was about to give up a battered old van pulled up. As I looked in, my heart sank. There was a snarling dog with studded collar and a very tough-looking man in the driver's seat. Still I got in and as I belted in, he said, "Hitch-hiking is not all that safe nowadays..."

"You're right there," I thought.

"You never know who you're going to pick up." I suddenly realised he was thinking of his safety not mine! In fact, he was kindness itself, and drove me right into the station alongside the platform where the train was waiting.

In the story, the Samaritan did not spare himself to provide for the man he found. He administered first aid, (first century style with wine, oil and bandages). He put the man on his donkey and walked beside to get him to safety. He cared for him overnight at an inn and then left two days wages to pay for the man's care while he went on with his journey. Furthermore, he guaranteed to cover the cost of any further care that would be needed.

In short, he took pity on him and he took responsibility for him.

So then, in answer to the question, "Who is my neighbour?", Jesus asks, "Who was a neighbour to the man?" The questioner cannot bring himself to say the Samaritan but acknowledges it with, "The one who had mercy on him."

"Go and do likewise," said Jesus.

So our neighbour is the person we come across. The person in need we encounter. That is challenging. We need God's compassion and resources to act like that, but then he is ready to give them.

I think there are two considerations to take into account:

Firstly, the neighbour is not the person we do not come across. I think with TV and internet we suffer from compassion fatigue from seeing too many people in trouble for whom we can do nothing. We can't solve the problems of all the needy. But we can respond to those right alongside.

Secondly, there is a balancing caution which Paul gives in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13:

... we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

I mention this because I have come across the situation where someone was being taken advantage of by an unscrupulous individual who refused to work and pleaded poverty. A Christian felt obliged to support the first person even to the extent of going into overdraft. This is neither commonsense nor Biblical as I have just quoted.

To return to the main point, I think we all harden our hearts and pass on by. We see people in various difficulties and we ignore them because It's too hard; too much trouble; too expensive; too dangerous; too time-consuming; too embarrassing; too too too...

But is it really? Or is that fear talking? The tough guy who stopped to pick me up blessed me greatly - I remember it after 26 years. I hope it was positive for him.

In London, one sees quite a few rough sleepers and beggars. A minister who worked with the street people of Earl's Court told us the worst thing for them was being ignored. He said you don't have to give money but do acknowledge their existence. As I started to follow his advice, I found it was generally the case and I had some memorably sweet encounters with the street people around my office in Westminster.

It is often the little things which make a big impact. They are not necessarily all that costly. We have a benefit system as a safety net which deals with much although not all need.

How might we as a parish love our neighbour? We started and still contribute to the local Foodbank. I think mainly music is a blessing to many mothers. The Op Shop helps many with good quality reasonably priced household items. The Selwyn Centre is a real help to some elderly people in the community who would appreciate company and activity in an otherwise lonely existence.

What does Jesus expect of us then? Not to spread ourselves so thinly that we can't function at all. Rather to be willing to help when we see the need and being willing to go when God directs us to certain needs and certain people along the way. It's the "Use me Prayer" again. Do you remember that one? Simply pray, "Use me, Lord" at the start of the day and see what unfolds before you.

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