

Seventh Sunday after Trinity 2018 (Evening)

Ecclesiasticus 4: 11 - end; Luke 10: 25 – 37

The annual Choristers' Concert begins immediately after this service so I'm under instructions – as if they ever differ from service to service! – to keep the sermon short and sweet. Stand up, say “God loves us all. Amen” and sit down; would probably discharge my brief, if only it gave people just enough time to pass the polos round before we recite the creed.

And actually, you might say that just about sums up the message of the story of the Good Samaritan. God wants us to love everyone, irrespective of who they are. We have a universal neighbourhood test. “Who is my neighbour?” the lawyer asked Jesus; and the story Jesus gives in return shows that our neighbour is absolutely anyone who is in need – not just people who live in streets like ours, who look like us, who have the same faith tradition as us, the same culture as us; but people who are not like ourselves at all, are

from different ethnic backgrounds people who are marginalised and despised, as the Samaritan was in the story, a member of an ethnically ambiguous group who lived on the margins of Jewish society, both geographically and socially.

So it's all about love. Love wins. It conquers every prejudice and hatred; it breaks down every barrier; it melts even the hardest heart. Let love prevail and we shall all live happily ever after . . . except it isn't so easy. Sometimes people accuse liberals like me who just want to accept and include everybody of being like naïve hippies who peddle cheap grace. But the point is that love is costly. It doesn't just mean that we go round with a silly grin on our face hugging everybody. There's another side to it. It means we accept liability for other people even when it is entirely counter-intuitive to do so and compromises our own integrity. Remember, the Priest and the Levite didn't cross over and pass by on the other side because they were callous bigots. They passed by so that they could

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faithfully and honourably maintain the traditions and rituals they had inherited. They didn't want to risk becoming ritually unclean; couldn't afford to risk being contaminated by the blood of a robbery victim.

The story of the Good Samaritan involves us accepting liability. The general legal principle at English Civil Law that we are liable to people affected by our negligence comes from a judgement that directly referenced the Good Samaritan story. It was in 1933 that Lord Pearson asked "Who is my neighbour?" just as the lawyer in Luke 10: 29 did; and then went on to rule that anyone who we should have reasonably foreseen would be affected by our actions could sue us for our negligence. And the Bible goes further than the law, because it creates liability for omissions as well as actions. Lord Diplock, *Dorset Yacht Company v. Home Office*, House of Lords, 1970:

"The . . . parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10 v.30) . . . illustrates in the conduct of the Priest and the Levite who passed by on the other

side, an omission which was likely to have as its reasonable and probable consequence damage to the health of the victim of the thieves, but for which the Priest and the Levite would have incurred no civil liability in English Law."

Life is full of hard realities and pragmatic considerations that the Bible seems to ignore. It is naïve and irresponsible simply to go around burdening ourselves with responsibility for anybody who presents in any kind of need. Certainly as a society we can't be doing that. Think of immigration. It's a common place to say "We need to have a grown up conversation about immigration." But apply the parable of the Good Samaritan to the boat loads of vulnerable men, women and children crossing the Mediterranean from Libya and there's not much of a conversation left to be had.

So we need to work out how we apply it. We could say that the Bible gives us ideals to work towards and

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apply as far as we can whenever it's reasonably practical to do so. We could make a distinction between what in the 1960s one philosopher and theologian called "Moral Man and Immoral Society."¹ It's terrible outdated and sexist language, but what he suggested was that the Bible referred to personal conduct. It sets ethical standards for our private lives. But it simply doesn't work if you try to apply it political decision. So we don't. We devise different sets of ethical criteria for that sphere and recognise economic and social realities.

Or we could simply accept that Jesus has set us up and left us stuck, wrestling with a gloriously irresponsible duty.

Amen.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr