

Seventh Sunday after Trinity 2016

Deuteronomy 30: 9 – 14; Luke 10: 25 – 37

Everybody knows the parable of the Good Samaritan. In fact most could probably preach a sermon on it. It was to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that Margaret Thatcher gave the benefit of her Biblical scholarship. The point about the parable of the Good Samaritan, she said, was that the Good Samaritan had got money!

But the parable of the Good Samaritan probably is the best known story in the New Testament. Mary and Joseph making their way to the stable with their donkey is probably better known – but we can't really count that as a Bible story, because neither the donkey nor the stable are actually in the Bible! Everybody knows what it is to be a Good Samaritan. We say "I was being a Good Samaritan," or "You were just doing your Good Samaritan bit for the day, were you?" And

we all know what we mean. It's ingrained as a cultural reference.

The reason it's so enduring is that it's just good, common sense. It's a story that illustrates a short phrase that sums up the whole of religious endeavour: love your neighbour as yourself. It's not rocket science. That's what the Book of Deuteronomy – we heard it in our first reading this morning – says: "It is not in heaven, that you should say 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'" No, rather it's "in your mouth and in your heart."

The Jewish society into which Jesus was born was regulated by the most complex religious laws. And the whole problem with how law operates is that the quest for consistency and predictability produces over-rigid and arbitrary results. That's why English law has traditionally been mitigated by equitable principles, or escape routes from the law being too much of an ass.

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Jewish law was a mine field; and we know that Jesus' opponents kept trying to get him to blow himself up by walking into a trap. There were hundreds of laws regulating every conceivable aspect of life. But the lawyer who spoke to Jesus knows that it had all been summed up in one pithy slogan in the book of Deuteronomy, not in the bit we read this morning, but in chapter 6: "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might;" and that in Leviticus 19 it says "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

And that is simply a religious codification of a universal principle. It's the golden rule that's to be found codified in all world faiths: do unto others as you would have done unto yourself. So this wonderful story of the Good Samaritan that so captures our imagination and occupies such a privileged place in our hearts is an example of that universal principle being put into practice. It's a story of someone doing unto another as he would have done unto himself.

And as he does so, the Good Samaritan, who's the good neighbour, breaks down barriers of taboo and difference. He's a Samaritan: he's an outsider; he's from part of the province of Syria; he's of dodgy religious provenance; he's someone with whom no good Jewish person would have any dealings. But that doesn't matter. Human need trumps all. We see godly compassion modelled in the person – any person, it doesn't matter who it is – who will reach out, who refuses to be confined by traditional prejudices, who isn't limited by what is deemed respectable but who recognises the fellow humanity of the person in need and is blind to difference. The good neighbour doesn't discriminate.

If we all lived like that we'd have functional relationships, cohesive communities and a stable society. But even though it's a universal principle, that simply makes life work better, we don't apply it. We gather here within 48 hours or so of six police officers being gunned down in Dallas as the U.S. fragments

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into racial disharmony. All the achievements of the civil rights movement seem to be unravelling to the extent that not only is necessary to say the obvious, but it's even necessary to reassert and protest the obvious with it emblazoned on placards and t-shirts that black lives matter. We gather here two weeks after Brexit with the mean and ugly underbelly of British society exposed through marked increases in reported hate crime and a scrabble to try to pull back provisions for social concern and inclusiveness. We gather here as conservative evangelicals are set to walk out of the General Synod at York today, not even prepared to enter into conversations about how those among us who are gay can celebrate their relationships.

When the lawyer to whom Jesus had told the story of the Good Samaritan had correctly identified that the person who had proved neighbour to the man who fell among robbers was the one who showed mercy, Jesus' instruction to him was to go and do likewise. And that is what he is saying to us, to go and do likewise; to

model and lives and the community we form, as we gather to break open God's word and to share the bread and wine of his Communion, on the sort of mercy and generosity we see in the Good Samaritan. That's the sort of mercy and generosity that breaks down barriers, that overcomes prejudice, that steps out of its comfort zone, that embraces difference and by doing so heals wounds.

Amen.