

St Botolph's Church Worthing
10 July 2016
Luke 10: 25-37

Father Roger Walker

The parable of the Good Samaritan is probably the best known of all the parables that Jesus told. We know it so well that we may just say 'Oh yes – it's telling us to love our neighbour' and then move on. So this morning let's see if there are any other messages for us in Jesus' words. It is well to remember that Jesus did not tell us his parables as allegories – where each situation or person represents something about our relationship with God – rather, he told them to make people think.

So let's do some thinking ourselves. The trigger to the parable is the question 'who is my neighbour?' and we often don't realise that the lawyer's response that we call Jesus' great commandment is made up of two quotations from the Old Testament. The first, 'Love the Lord your God' comes from Deuteronomy and the second, 'Love the neighbour', comes from Leviticus and is one of a long list of commandments in Leviticus 19 which parallel and amplify the Ten Commandments.

The full commandment, which the lawyer would have known, was 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself'. The important phrase here is 'one of your people'. Jews were to be good to fellow Jews: what they did to other nations was not really important. So the priest and Levite passing by on the other side exhibited not just a lack of compassion but direct disobedience to God. They had not cared for one of their own people. Jesus was reflecting the division that existed between the religious leaders of the Jews, of whom the lawyer was one, and the ordinary people whom the leaders scathingly stigmatised as 'am ha-aretz' – the people of the land.

The first part of the parable emphasised a social division that everyone knew existed, but which no one among the Jewish leadership was willing to address. It would have made the lawyer very uncomfortable and probably have provoked a certain smugness among the ordinary people listening, but then comes the bombshell: along comes a Samaritan and cares for the injured man. If one thing united the Jewish leadership and the ordinary people it was hatred of the Samaritans. Amazingly the origins of that hatred went back nearly 800 years, to the time when the Assyrians conquered the northern part of the Holy Land – centred on Samaria – but not the southern part centred on Jerusalem. Assyrian foreign policy to prevent revolts in their Empire – was to deport populations to another land and replace them with foreigners.

These foreigners came to Samaria and began to worship God and set up their own temple. The Jews felt they had no claim on God and no right to do this and so began the enmity between Jews and Samaritans that continued to Jesus' day. If anyone should have passed by on the other side, it was the

Samaritan seeing an injured Jew: but he did not. The reaction from to this from Jesus' listeners would have varied from outrage to embarrassment, but all of them would have known that here was something unusual happening and of course Jews emphasised the unusual by the Samaritan paying for the injured Jew to stay at the inn and promising to pay for any extra expenses of his recovery.

So the people listening to Jesus' parable would have been reminded of the social divisions that existed among Jews, then of disobedience to God – especially on the part of their leaders. Finally they would hear a condemnation of the way that Jews and Samaritans behaved towards each other. The fact that the Samaritan was a good neighbour is almost incidental to a call to heal community divisions and to be obedient to God.

That is the 'Go and do thou likewise' of the Jews' conclusion, and you know you can almost parallel the social situation in Jesus' day that in our own country today. For a lot of political commentary stirs up a feeling that it is Old Etonians and public school boys as our leaders in Parliament who are lording it over ordinary people. There is also a danger that we stoke up division between ourselves and people who are not like us: black, immigrants, asylum seekers and so on.

Jesus is telling us that our common humanity should over-ride all social divisions and that this should reach beyond just an acceptance of each other. It should be a willingness to serve others and reflect God's love to them. The Good Samaritan did this: can we? Or do we take the comfortable path of accepting the status quo and complain about the discordant nature of our society but do nothing to heal it? Or do we live in obedience to God and make it more as he wants it to be?

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

10.7.16