

Sunday 11 July 2010: Sixth Sunday after Trinity

The Good Samaritan

Readings: Colossians 1.1-14; Luke 10.25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most often repeated and loved stories of the Christian faith. In fact, for some of us it has become so familiar that we can no longer feel its subversive power.

Jesus frequently uses parables in his teaching. His parables are like puzzles which force the hearer to appropriate the narrative for themselves. A parable asks us: 'Where do you stand?' 'Whose side do you take?' 'Which one of these characters is you?' Perhaps at different times we are all of them. The reason Jesus' parables still fascinate us is that they speak beyond their original context and address the context of each person who has ears to hear and also the even wider context of the societies in which we live.

Stephen Barton writes 'Reading Jesus' parables as they are meant to be read is to be once more astonished by the Gospel'. The literary approach to parables argues that they are works which engage with our own powers of empathy and imagination. They cannot be interpreted once and for all and made into law or dogma. The parables which Jesus tells remain open-ended, they should live with us, continuing to shock, puzzle and engage. 'Parables', says John Crossan, 'should undermine the structure of audience expectation, they are meant to change not reassure us.' Jesus seldom replies to his questioners and critics with value statements. A statement ends with a full stop, a parable ends with a question mark – like a question mark it loops round and forces us to look both inwards and outwards.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is only found in Luke's Gospel. A lawyer is trying to test Jesus. The lawyer in this case is someone well-versed in religious law, someone who believes in their own righteousness and is thus using their knowledge of the law to trick or to trap Jesus in order to condemn him. How familiar is that from our present context for there are of course many of us who would seek to use scripture to justify our own opinions and trap our opponents? The lawyer asks "who is my neighbour?" He would know well that the Hebrew Scriptures in Leviticus defines neighbour in terms of family, kin, and close friends, but would Jesus argue for a broader concept of neighbour? Would he dare to be 'inclusive'? – an inclusiveness which was already causing scandal for this Galilean. 'Is any Jew a neighbour, even a sinful one, a tax-collector, a prostitute, a woman, a person of questionable sexual history?' Or, 'what about non-Jews, those outside the covenant, the uncircumcised, the Roman occupier, the despised Samaritan, the unclean and immoral Gentile?'

Notice the way Jesus does not fall into the trap. He does not join or countenance the prejudice. Instead, his parable reframes the question – his parable turns the question from 'who is my neighbour?' to 'To *whom* am I *myself* a neighbour?' It is a subtle but fundamental shift from the question of 'who can I choose to be my neighbour and thus by implication who will I reject and condemn?' to a completely different emphasis which is fundamental to the Gospel: 'how do I *become* neighbour, how do I stop pointing the finger and condemning and start becoming the Gospel myself?' This is the means by which we do *not* seek to define neighbour but are ourselves defined by Christ's call to love neighbour as we love ourselves.

The parable Jesus tells is very cleverly constructed. Its seeming simplicity belies the complexity of the issues with which it deals. Three characters react to the plight of a man who fell among robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The priest passes by on the other side of the road. Why? The Levite passes by on the other side of the road. Why? The parable does not explain motives. We must fill those in from our own life experience. And then a Samaritan comes to the rescue, the traditional hated enemy becomes the one who saves. We are not told who the victim on the road is. So this victim could be a Jew saved by a Palestinian, or in a different context the Tutsi saved by the Hutu, the evangelical saved by the gay person, the member of the Taliban saved by the British soldier, or the other way round. And the Samaritan does not just save. He goes radically beyond saving. He risks his own life and reputation in order to help, and he offers radical generosity, not just a little bit of help, but finance enough to pay for three months of care, with the promise of more on his return. The only motive we are given is that he sees him and has compassion for him. Yes, compassion – that goes beyond, race, or tribe, or religion, or sexuality, or ideology, minority group, or scape-goating, and sees not the categorisation, or the prejudice, or the learnt fear, but sees the human being. That's it; that's our Gospel, the Good News of the compassion of Christ which has the power and the healing to overcome the wrong done to the victim.

So why did the priest walk by? Before we condemn the priest perhaps we can fill in our own reasons. Why did we walk past? The same reasons that led us perhaps to walk past the homeless man in the street on the way to church this morning, or perhaps fail to stick up for our colleague at work, or put ourselves out for the relative who needed visiting, or speak out against an injustice? There are plenty of good reasons: I could not get involved, I was so busy, you can't help everybody, you don't know where it will lead, you start helping and then you're stuck, it's harder to walk away once you've begun to help and I simply haven't got the time, it will only encourage dependency, they've actually got to sort it out for themselves, I've done my best but I simply can't do any more. What would others say anyway? I'd end up getting the blame. I would end up regretting it, it wouldn't look good, they would suspect my motives, you have to preserve your boundaries, it's none of my business anyway... Do you recognise any of these justifications for walking by on the other side? This is not a comfortable parable; it asks you: 'what are you going to do about the person who others have abandoned? What are you going to do to change things?' Because, like it or not, these are the very ones who Jesus says are our neighbours.

I was made aware of this power of the Parable of The Good Samaritan when I directed a group of Melanesian Brothers who performed it around Guadalcanal during a period of ethnic war and bloodshed between the people of Malaita and people of Guadalcanal in which twenty thousand people had fled their homes and many had been killed. We gave the parable a contemporary context and performed in the centre of villages right around the island which had been torn apart by the violence. We performed with the militants standing round with machine guns and belts of bullets. The parable confronted them with a Malaitan, their enemy, beaten up by militants and left dying on the road, they witnessed the priest walking by and refusing to get involved and then the Government military in hot pursuit of the militants but refusing to stop and help, and then, an old man from their own tribe, speaking the home language of the audience, hearing cries in a different language, the language of his and the audience's enemy, stopping, bending down, gently cleaning away the blood and binding the wounds, and then picking up the Malaitan and carrying him, on his shoulders to safety, his own body covered with the sweat, blood and dirt of his enemy – no longer enemies, but two human beings holding onto each other in the middle of the madness

of this senseless hatred, overturning bigotry by an act of human compassion, and in this act restoring the dignity of each other and the tribe they represented. There was total silence, a deathly silence when you know a whole huge crowd is listening to every sound; a tension so great that one feared the audience may suddenly attack the actors and one no longer knew whether they saw the Good Samaritan as saviour or traitor. "Which of these was a true neighbour?" Some of the audience began to murmur and some of those in the crowd started to cry. The militants who were watching stayed until the end and then quietly disappeared into the night, perhaps carrying this parable with them with their guns. It touched the wound of ethnic hatred and cried out for a similar healing and it was only the audience who could make that possible. It was a time when moralistic teaching would never have been heard, but Jesus' parable, as story and action, slipped past their defences and cried out for a humanity greater than each side's self-righteousness.

Last weekend I was away in Canterbury. My young nephew and his girlfriend stayed at my flat for the weekend. It was Pride Day and out of the window they saw two girls on the steps of St Martin's who had clearly had far too much to drink. One of them was vomiting, over and over again. Half an hour later when they looked out of the window, she was still there, still vomiting. They got worried and went downstairs, sat next to her on the step, she was very drunk and continued to vomit and was in a terrible state. So they invited the two of them into my flat to get them cleaned up, use my toilet, and get them re-hydrated with some water and washed. "No, you shouldn't invite them in," I found myself saying on the phone, "you can't do that in London, what if..."

But they had already done it. My nephew is training to be an operating theatre technician in a hospital and his girlfriend is training to be a midwife and nurse. The girl who had been most ill, it turned out, had been celebrating getting the results of her degree; she got a First. "Well, she should have had more sense," I said. "She was ever so grateful," said my nephew's girlfriend. You never know, perhaps they saved her life; they certainly restored her dignity, in my eyes increased their own, and through their example, increased mine.

And who is your neighbour? Or to whom could you become a neighbour? Perhaps a neighbour to the one you find most difficult to accept. How can we go beyond our own barriers to live Jesus' radical compassion and be changed by it? Go and do the same.