

THE GOOD SAMARITAN, THE NEIGHBOUR

Deuteronomy 30. 9-14

Colossians 1. 1-14

Luke 10. 25-37

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

If you go up Forest Lane, which is the little street that is located alongside Moore's Hotel, you will stumble upon the offices of Guernsey Samaritans. This organisation offers support to those who are in emotional distress or who are contemplating suicide; and the support is given in person, by telephone, e-mail, text and in writing. Approximately seven thousand people in Guernsey receive help from the Samaritans every year. And if some of those distressed people were with us today, they would say that Guernsey Samaritans is an organisation which is dedicated to assuring such people that they are not abandoned and that they need not be alone. That sense, that human beings are not to be ditched when they fall into distress; but rather that we should do what we can to pull up beside them; that sense has a deep place in our cultural memory which comes ultimately from our Lord, and particularly his story of the Good Samaritan.

Let's review some details.

A man fell into the hands of robbers. The precipitating event here is an act of violence. The world of our gospel story is a cruel world, where some people behave inhumanly, stealing and wounding and having no care for the victims they leave behind. This is also *our world*. Some people in it are left half dead.

Three people come along, one after another. The first two, the priest and the Levite, notice but do not stop. They were respectable people, and one might have expected

them to stop; although perhaps they had other obligations that would have been compromised had they done so. We all know the ambiguities of competing obligations and the difficulty of sorting them out. And we don't know their particular situation at that time. All we do know is that they did not stop.

The third person, who did stop, was an unappealing figure. The very appellation given to him—Samaritan—revealed his despised status. He would have been thought of, not as a real Jew, but as a half-breed of sorts. You may recall that Jesus once, sitting by a well, spoke to a woman of Samaria. And she was struck by that act of conversation. 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman from Samaria?' For Jews did not deal with Samaritans.

So that is a twist in Christ's story. He gives the good actions to the person you would least expect to have them. The socially-despised guy turns out to be the good guy.

The Samaritan is also generous to a fault. He binds the wounds of the man, treats them as best he could, and puts the man on his own beast, and takes him to an inn. There, the Samaritan pays for the man's care; and he promises to return and pay anything more, if that should turn out to be needed. Our Lord strongly underlines this over-generosity.

Now if that were all of the story, it would be powerful enough; and it would certainly urge upon us the need to be generous to others. But what makes this story even more powerful is the way Jesus uses it.

We need to back up. This story comes about because of a man, a lawyer, a student of the Law, who wants to test Christ. He asks our Lord about eternal life and how to get it. Jesus doesn't answer, but turns his question back upon him. 'What is written in the Law?' And the man answers very well, very wisely. 'You shall love the

Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ Christ says: very good, do that and you’ll have eternal life. But the man wants more; he wants to justify himself in our Lord’s eyes; and so he asks one more question. ‘And who is my neighbour?’

And that’s why Jesus told this parable.

Now if this is all we get, we are likely to mistake the point by thinking that the man on the road (the wounded, robbed, abandoned man) is my neighbour. ‘Who is my neighbour?’ the lawyer asks, and the answer is: any other human being who is in need.

And this sense of the neighbour being ‘out there’ lays upon us a heavy burden, a heavy moral burden, a frankly impossible-to-bear moral burden, which, when we inevitably fail to treat all other people as our neighbours, leaves us with guilt. I doubt that there is not a soul here today who has not recently run across someone in need. And most likely (although I am open to correction) we walked past on the other side and did nothing. There was our neighbour, we think. We imagine Christ pointing to him or her and saying: *there* is your neighbour.

And the burden of that way of thinking is truly intolerable. Fortunately for us, there is still more to the parable.

Firstly, when our Lord finishes telling it, he asks a final question of the lawyer. And that question is not to repeat the lawyer’s question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ It is, instead, a graciously different question. It is this: ‘Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ That is a very different question indeed. Jesus does not make us ask, ‘Who is my neighbour?’, a question whose answer is as vast as the seven billion human beings alive today.

Rather, Christ's gracious question is, 'which of these was a neighbour?' Who in this story made himself a neighbour to that particular man?

In other words, the Good Samaritan didn't *see* a neighbour; the Good Samaritan *was* a neighbour.

'Go and do likewise', our Lord says. And at once we are liberated. Jesus doesn't command us to love everyone. He just wants us to start. 'Can you be a neighbour to someone?' he says. You may walk past a thousand people, but can you make yourself a neighbour to at least one? Can you love at least one person the way you love yourself?

Secondly, there is one final thing for us to learn. This story is told by Christ to address the matter of loving our neighbour. But the commandment of love of neighbour follows upon the commandment of love of God.

Consider the scene of our Lord telling this story. Why is he there? Why is Jesus getting his feet dusty and his throat dry to tell this story? Is it not because he decided to come down from heaven and walk the same road that we walk? And is it not the case that the road we walk is a road of violence and cruelty? And there he found us, beaten down by life, by sin, by crime, by apathy, alienated and nearly abandoned by the human world. There he met us, bound up our wounds and dressed them with wine and oil and arranged for our healing; and restored us to human company; and agreed, no matter how great the cost might be, that he would pay it.

I like to think that after we were set up there in the lodging house, that Christ, the Samaritan-figure, the 'half-breed' of mixed divine and human blood, who promised to come back and make good whatever our debts might be, that he walked on along a very painful journey; a long path finally up a lonely hill, where he embraced a tree;

and the iron of nails held him until he breathed no more. When I come again, he said, I will make it all good. And he has; and he did; and he does.

This is the deep meaning of the story of the Good Samaritan. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, for the Lord your God has proved *himself to be your neighbour*.

Amen.