

## **THE GOOD SAMARITAN**

**Hear the word and do it.**

**Luke 10.25-37**

### **Introduction**

If you haven't noticed we have just lived through an election campaign and the notorious 'Gotcha' question has been on display for weeks. We even have 'Gotcha' photos of Australian Electoral Commission staff having breaks. How dare they!

Ah, the joy of a press corps with cauterised brains.

This of the Good Samaritan is an attempted 'Gotcha' moment.

The lawyer is a rude man. He breaks into a private conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples after their return from the mission of the 72. He stands to address Jesus which appears respectful but his demeanour is anything but. He is not the learner but the prosecutor. He is the barrister who asks the tricky questions that get the answer he needs to convict the accused in the dock. Truth does not matter but a conviction does.

### **Looking through a parable**

That is social and theological setting for one of the best known parables in the Gospel tradition. To be able to read parables is an essential part of Christian thinking and life, theology and ethics.

I read them as metaphors. The metaphor was Jesus' method for creating meaning, along with simile and dramatic action. This was the way Jesus did theology. He was not brought up in the Greek tradition the likes of which we see in the creeds for instance, but in the Hebrew tradition of storytelling.

The metaphor is more than an illustration. It not only helps explain meaning it creates meaning. A parable is an extended metaphor. And that opens up a whole new world for us.

Being a metaphor a parable encourages the reader to examine the human predicament through the world created by the parable. The picture is everything. It is a house and the listener/reader is invited to take up residence and explore the world from the windows in the different rooms of that residence.

## **The lawyer**

To the story.

The lawyer asks a most interesting question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Something odd here; how can I do something to inherit something? Inheritance is a gift. Inheritance is not a payment

for services rendered. The lawyer would know that. It is a trap question about eternal life with a subtext of law and election.

Jesus responds with a question, 'What do you think about the topic?'

And the lawyer has a view, derived from Deuteronomy 6.5, Leviticus 19.18; love God totally with every ounce of your being and your neighbour.

Jesus responds, "Great answer. Go and do it.' To inherit eternal life all he has to do is live a life of unqualified love for God and his neighbour.

But this is not a man stuck for words. So he asks another question. Now we might have expected him to ask, 'How do I do that? That bar is so high I cannot even see it to jump over it.'

But no, he instead asks, "And who is my neighbour?" Let's see if we can lower the bar. Let's get a few rules in place. Luke comments that he is seeking to justify himself. Unlike the sinners and tax collectors who heard Jesus gladly and then justified God (7.29-30) this man hears Jesus and wants to develop a form of justice that will get him eternal life on his own terms, not God's.

Neighbour was a subject debated much among the lawyers and there were many answers given in the Hebrew Bible, but all of them

were restricted in their notion of neighbour; sometimes by ethnicity or national boundary or religious commitment.

## **The Parable**

So Jesus tells a story, an extended metaphor or ballad, providing a case study for consideration: a story found only in Luke, of the compassionate Samaritan. It's a tale in seven parts.

This is not a sentimental tale but is deeply violent. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a trail of banditry, a no-man's land of violence and thuggery.

The Judean traveller is left beaten and all but dead. Luke's description of this man is critical for understanding what happens next. He is stripped; his clothes have been taken from him. So a cultural marker was missing to identify this man's ethnicity.

He is all but dead and thus unresponsive. Neither language nor accent can help anyone along the road identify his origins or ethnicity. All-important ethnic and class markers are missing.

Two of his countrymen pass by scurrying to get to their destinations. They are people of standing and dedicated to holiness and fellow Judeans but all that is not enough. Their concern for personal safety (real enough) and ritual purity justifies their not crossing the road to look.

The priest is the more prestigious of the two. He may well have been riding as he belonged to a class of some status and wealth. The priest needs more information before he can help this man. I am sure that he would want to do his duty under the law to assist. If love of neighbour meant anything in the law it meant caring for your fellow Judean. But where are the markers. He is naked and unconscious, so who could be sure of his ethnic-linguistic identity.

If the man was dead or died while the priest was attending him the consequences were huge. If he tried to serve at the altar in a state of uncleanness he might well have his brains knocked out with clubs by younger priests.

The Levite, a lesser being, has a less fraught decision. He was simply an assistant to the priests. He was not about to upstage the priest so he too passes by.

Then the story explodes in the face of the hearers and the listeners too. It's possible that the listeners might be expecting the third and lowest tier of temple hierarchy to turn up-a pious lay-person.

But instead Jesus chooses the figure of a Samaritan traveller. He is obviously well-equipped for a long journey. Unlike the priest and the Levite he approaches the man.

The Samaritan's personal safety is even more at risk than the priest and Levite because of his ethnicity; yet he leaves himself open and vulnerable; he is, after all, the hated enemy.

He further risks his life by transporting the wounded man to an inn in Jewish territory. Inns were found in towns and villages in this instance Jericho. His safest response should have been to drop the wounded man at the gate of Jericho and get out of there fast.

A Samaritan turning up in town with a wounded Jew on his riding animal was asking for community vengeance. Who would believe his story?

In this dangerous situation he spends the night caring for him. Ancient inns could make wild-west saloons seem like a Sunday school room. What is it with this man?

Then the following day he parts with two denarii to pay for up to two weeks care. He does that for a good reason. The penalty for not paying debts was to be made a slave. Not to pay your bill in a commercial inn was to risk that penalty. Remember this victim had nothing. So he makes as significant down payment and final settlement when he returns. He wants the man returned to health and community.

Why? Jesus speaks of compassion. What is this enigmatic quality that is often spoken of today?

A few weeks ago we came across this word in the raising of the widow's son at Nain.

I said then that first of all Jesus puts the nameless woman at the centre of the universe as the recipient of the undivided attention of the bearer of God's creative word. She has his whole attention.

Notice in this story the beaten man is the centre of the Samaritan's attention.

Second Jesus' whole viscera are taken up with her plight. In the Hebrew Bible it is linked with mercy, God's mercy. It is not a fleeting moment of feeling sorry. It is a sustained energy that takes over the whole inner life.

Notice how the Samaritan's whole energy is given over the welfare of the other.

Thirdly, in its use in the Gospels that energy turns itself towards redeeming action.

And that is precisely what happens here.

No wonder people see Jesus in this story.

## The lawyer

Most stunning in this case study is the use to which Jesus puts the story. Instead of the legal question, “Who is my neighbour?” or “Who deserves my love?” Jesus asks “To whom can I show myself as neighbour?”

The lawyer answers without using the distasteful word Samaritan and instead points to the man’s character of mercy; the very character of God. This man is a God-like, a Christ character.

He cannot see the kingdom because he cannot see that God is neighbour in Jesus. That is the answer to the question, ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ I can do nothing. My humanity is broken. God in Jesus is the Samaritan

The story transforms the lawyer’s question from law to gospel, from a limited responsibility to unlimited gift-giving. Jesus demands that disciples become the kind of person who treats everyone encountered—no matter how alien, frightening, defenceless or vulnerable—as the Samaritan did; as God does.

The neighbour is the one who challenges the stereotypes and boundaries laid out by our societies and do what the kingdom demands; shows justice and mercy at wild and vast expense.

How can I be neighbour? By doing just that. The kingdom knows no ethnic or national boundaries and it can never be defined by our incessant boundary making. At the end the lawyer cannot bring himself to name the Samaritan as the bearer of the kingdom, the neighbour even if he has to acknowledge the point of the story. He cannot accept the logic of the story because his ethnic prejudices are so great.

## **Conclusion**

In the style of Jesus we may need to consider some questions.

What stereotypes and boundaries stop us being the neighbour as God is neighbour? Can we name them? How can we become gift giving people? Fear stopped people being neighbour. What are our fears?