

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Luke 10: 25-37

On 3 April 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee Dr Martin Luther King Jr gave the last speech of his life. It is thought by many to be among the greatest speeches of all time. He ended the speech prophetically telling his audience that whilst *he* might not get there, God had allowed him to go up to a mountain and see the Promised Land and live in the knowledge that 'we, as a people' *will*. Earlier on in the speech he dwelt at length on the Parable of the Good Samaritan exhorting the crowd to 'develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.' Martin Luther King's Samaritan was 'a man of another race' a great man because 'he was able to project the "I" into the "Thou".' King went on to speak of the Priest and the Levite 'what my imagination tells me' he said 'it's possible, that those men were afraid.'

As we discovered earlier in the year there is always more to Jesus' parables than we think or have been led to believe. The Parable of the Two Lost Sons which we read in Lent opened our eyes to the culture of the day and in doing so caused to completely rethink our understanding of the place of the two boys and their Father and from there reassess the parables' meaning. There was a sense in which the parable had become so familiar to us that we were unable to get under its skin. The same applies to this Lucan parable, perhaps the most well known in the gospels.

I read a book during the week called *The Political Samaritan – how power hijacked a parable*. The author examined the use of the Good Samaritan parable in political discourse. He examined the Hansard record from the British Parliament and found that politicians of every stripe had used the parable to colour their political rhetoric. It was the most widely used piece of scripture. Both Margaret Thatcher and Jeremy Corbyn had used the parable – hardly political bedfellows. Kevin Rudd mentioned the parable, even Donald Trump has quoted it, not the first name which comes to mind when thinking of Biblical exegetes.

Margaret Thatcher looked at the parable from the perspective of the Samaritan. She once famously said nobody would have remembered the Good Samaritan if he'd had only good intentions. But he had money and was able to help! Classic Thatcherite doctrine. Those who are more left of centre, naturally use the parable to speak about the treatment and care of the poor and vulnerable. Although having said that George W Bush, in his inauguration speech said that in regards poverty the people of the US would not '*pass by on the other side*' during his term.

So whilst we need to acknowledge that a parable can speak in many different circumstances I wonder if this parable has some other important messages, which perhaps our politicians would rather not tackle. At the heart of this account is the clash of Jews and Samaritans, these cousins in the faith who despite their similarities in matters of texts, faith, culture, geography will have nothing to do with each other. It is extraordinary, beyond the imagination of 1st Century Jewish folk that the Samaritan would stop and care for this man, a Jew. You might recall the astonishment of the Samaritan women meeting Jesus at the well in John's gospel 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) And remember, the Samaritan doesn't just pick him up and brush him off, but takes him on his own animal to a hostel, pays for his care and offer further funds if they should be required. There is much more to this than simply caring for the poor and vulnerable!

The political class in this country and across the west have been quick to use this parable. But I wonder about the way it has been used, many of the uses of the parable have been in the context of 'charity begins at home.' It seems that there are few references to the parable in response to the refugee crisis which remains a critical issue in our time. One comment that was made in this regard came from Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish First Minister. She spoke in the wake of photographs of Alan Kurdi the three year old Syrian boy who drowned on his journey to Europe. 'I am angry' she said, 'very angry at the "walk on the other side" approach of the UK government.'

It is significant that in response to the question who is my neighbour, Jesus doesn't speak about who they are, but what we should be doing. He doesn't define or place any limits on the idea of neighbour, he describes a scenario and simply says go and do likewise; in other words stop asking and start doing! But there is more! Clearly in regards this international debate many are passing by on the other side. Over fifty years ago Martin Luther King identified the problem that remains at the heart of this issue. 'What my imagination tells me' he said 'it's possible, that those men were afraid.'

What we afraid of? If you think about it the parable is being told by a Jewish man, by Jesus. If he had said that a Samaritan had been left by the roadside and was helped by a Jewish person not one of the religious establishment we would have thought it still had the same punch, the same poignancy. Of course, Jesus is having another go at the scribes and the Pharisees. But he doesn't say that, it is the outsider who helps. It is the outsider who shows the way, it is the outsider demonstrating love, morality. The parable is much more about the outsider showing the way.

Does this rather overturn our understanding of way things are meant to be? I wonder if it this that we afraid of. Amen.