

I. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is well-known to most of us in the church And even beyond it. We can still hear people talk about somebody as a 'good Samaritan' without them necessarily knowing who said it or what story it comes from.

In Luke's Gospel, the question comes from someone who is trying to test Jesus out, to trip him up. And Jesus' answer is a perfectly good Jewish one. He quotes the commandments from the Old Testament: loving God and loving our neighbour. Elsewhere Jesus says in the Gospels that that pretty well sums up the law and the prophets. It expresses the heart of our religion and faith and spirituality. It's only when he's pushed by the lawyer that Jesus goes onto re-define what the word 'neighbour' actually means.

You all know how the story goes. The man is beaten up by brigands, highwaymen, robbed of all his possessions and left for dead. And the reason that the priest and the Levi pass by on the other side is because they've finished their service in the temple in Jerusalem and they're now on their way back home for a period of rest. They don't want to go near the man in case he's dead, because that will make them unclean, according to the Law, for seven whole days. Yes, it's selfish but understandable in a kind of way.

The point about the Samaritan is that Samaritans were disliked and mistrusted by Jewish folk. In the past there'd been conflict between them, even war. They were enemies. And doubtless Samaritans felt the same way about Jewish people. You couldn't trust them, they were up to no good.

And yet this Samaritan is indifferent to whether the man is Jewish or not. He doesn't care. All that matters to him is that this is someone in desperate need. And he looks after him, he cares for him, he goes out of his way to ensure his recovery and well-being.

II. It's strange the way that Jesus uses the Samaritan as an example of a good neighbour. Perhaps the story would have worked better if it had been a Samaritan who had been beaten up and a Jew who had come and looked after him. But no: Jesus reverses the roles that we might have expected.

And that's because Jesus here making more than one point. First of all, according to Luke, he is redefining who the neighbour is. It's anyone who is in need, anyone who is vulnerably and desperate. Luke has a thing about outsiders. All the way through the Gospel it's the unexpected people, the poor, the unclean, sinners, women, strangers who really get what Jesus this is on about.

Indeed Jesus sees God's good news as particularly directed towards them. It's the insiders who want to keep the door closed, who want to protect what they have and not share it with others. But that's not what God is like. God's hospitality is wide and generous, embracing all.

In other words, the only qualification to receive the good news is need. That's enough to make them a neighbour. Regardless of how we feel about them or their race or their sexuality or anything else about them. Regardless even of the inconvenience to us. Jesus radically re-defines what 'neighbour' means,

III. There's a second point to this story. Luke is also inviting his audience to identify with the man in the story who is beaten up. After all, this was a notoriously dangerous road to travel on. The audience probably knew people or had heard of people who'd had a similar experience on that dangerous road.

When we hear this parable today we identify with the Samaritan and of course in a real sense we're meant to, we're meant to be encouraged and inspired by his example of kindness. But most of Jesus' audience would have identified, not with the Samaritan, but with the man lying in the ditch. Lying in the ditch and watching two of his own religious leaders, who might be expected to care for him, cross the road to get away from him, so engrossed are they in their own needs and their own anxieties.

And in the end the man is cared for by the last person on earth he'd expect. A Samaritan, an enemy, a person never to be trusted. He receives kindness and healing from a totally unexpected quarter. If he had a choice in the matter he would rather have been cared for by one of his own people and not by this stranger, this alien outsider.

And that brings a very different perspective to this parable. Not only does it encourage us to redefine what 'neighbour' means but it also encourages us to be open to the neighbourly love reaching us from unexpected people and places, perhaps people and places we feel uncomfortable with, we dislike, we mistrust. Because sometimes that's precisely how God's love and grace come to us.

That's why, as St Augustine tells us, the man in the ditch represents, in a sense, all of us: damaged, wounded by life, vulnerable, needy. And that's why the ultimate image of the 'good Samaritan' is Jesus himself who comes to save us, to care for us, to tend our wounds, to heal us.

IV. So there's a double challenge in today's Parable. First, there's the challenging question, Who is my neighbour? Think of those who are in need, who are lonely and desperate in our own community, in the streets and lanes around us. Think of friends and family who are going through difficult times. Think of countries torn apart by war and violence. And then think of people we dislike, people we've had conflict with, people who may have hurt us or someone we love. All of these are our neighbours and, when God gives us the chance, we are summoned to do them good, to love them, to enable them to find healing and thrive.

But there's a second challenge too. Where do we receive God's grace? Where are the unexpected places we have received it and might receive in the future? Who are the people who show us love even if we don't like them, don't trust them? God comes to us in Christ in unexpected ways, in unexpected people. Where do we identify those who have been neighbours to us? Where might we be open in the future to receive neighbourly love from Christ in an unexpected other?

That capacity to love and be loved, to offer divine grace and to receive it, is located within our own hearts. It's not something we need to strive for. Or go to great efforts to achieve. By our baptism, by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, we already have that capacity deep within our hearts. As Deuteronomy so beautifully puts it: *The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.*

Thanks be to God.

*Mthr Dorothy*