



I can't remember whether it was the story we had as our Gospel reading today, or the patent medicine (produced by Timothy White's & Taylor's) that first introduced me to the Good Samaritan, but I rather think that it was the latter! Anyway it is one of the best known and most loved of Jesus's parables, yet we find it (perhaps I should say 'I find it'?) one that is peculiarly difficult to act on in my own life. We know the story so well:



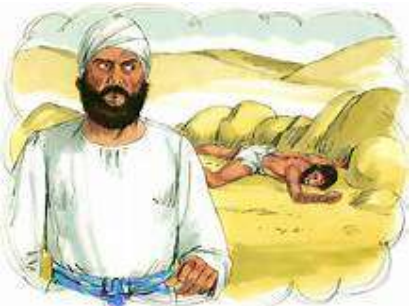
A Jewish man was travelling on the rough and dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he is set upon by robbers who left him almost for dead. Two other very respectable Jewish men, a priest and a Levite came, separately, by the same road, both saw the injured man but chose to ignore him, avoiding him by walking on the other side of the road.



It was not until a third man, a Samaritan, and therefore to Jews of the time, not at all respectable, that the poor man got any assistance, and then it was not a cursory enquiry after his health, but a full-on effort to do all he could to rescue the man, to bring him to safe lodging at an inn and then to pay for his care until the Samaritan could return, promising to pay any other costs the innkeeper had incurred.



I have to confess, if I see someone fall over in the street, say, my first instinct is always to hope that someone else, better qualified than I think I am, will get to them first to lend aid. I justify this behaviour by recollecting that, when I fall over, I am always desperate to scramble to my feet and not make a fuss, but, whilst that is true, I know it is really a rather feeble excuse. The man in the story was clearly in no position to scramble to his feet and the fact that he had been stripped by his robbers meant that even the most cursory glance would have revealed to any passer-by that he needed help.



The priest and the Levite might have said to themselves that the man looked dead and any contact with a dead body would have rendered them ritually unclean in the eyes of their religion, but it seems to me much more likely that their concern would have been not to get involved, because that would only cause trouble and, in any case, it might have been a trap, the robbers might have been lying in wait to attack the next lone traveller. Whatever their thought processes, they told themselves that it was better not to get involved. They laid aside their common humanity in favour of their own comfort and convenience, these religious leaders of the people. It was left to the despised outsider, the Samaritan, to put himself out, to recognise a fellow human being in dire need, and offer lavish assistance in coming to his aid.

In order to try to assess the implications for us of this piece of teaching from Jesus, I want to spend a few moments considering the some of the details of the Gospel passage. I am conscious of having said, many times, before, that Jesus' parables have a single point - they are not allegories in which each detail has a significance of its own, yet I think this text merits a bit of further probing. First I want to consider the significance of the Samaritan in the story. To Jesus' first hearers, this would have been very apparent, as the antagonism between Jews and Samaritans was a visceral feeling they both had, but for us, we have to be told (as we have been in many sermons, probably) of the animosity. I have been trying to think of other relationships that give rise to this sort of hostility.



***Martyrdom of Joan Waste in Derby and the commemoration of the Padley Martyrs at Grindleford***

In centuries past, especially shortly after the Reformation, the hostility between Roman Catholics and Protestants certainly had that sort of flavour, but those animosities have now, thankfully, all but died out. Perhaps any case of civil war carries with it this sort of mutual hostility. The point is the antagonists share much in common - it is the emphasis on the differences that makes the situation so nasty. Although the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' time had a common enemy in the Romans the very fact that they were not strong enough to overthrow them probably encouraged greater invective to be poured into the relationship between the two groups. It has become all too common in Britain today to see fault lines running through society, and perhaps all of us, and especially those in authority, need to apply the 'who is my neighbour' test to those situations where division is apparent.



And that brings me on to the other thing I wanted to consider this morning; the lawyer, whose question gave rise in the first place to the telling of this parable. The fact that he was a lawyer tells us something important – he was a man who made his living out of 'the rules' and their application. We have had, over the plague period, a lot of new rules to contend with, and we have seen plenty of examples where the entirely productive spirit of the rules has been hijacked by a narrow focus on the actual words of the rules, which has had nothing at all to do with keeping people safe, both by those who have wanted to 'get away with it' and by those who have wanted to catch someone else out. Luke tells us that the lawyer he is talking about was not just a seeker after the truth, but was trying to test Jesus, to catch him out if he could. The fact that he goes straight to the heart of the spirit of the law of the Old Covenant by quoting, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself" tells us that he really did know the answer to his own question, and he has earned himself a sort of shabby immortality by not letting the matter drop then, but persisting to justify himself by asking his supplementary question. In doing that he has done us all a favour by provoking Jesus into telling this parable that gives us a pattern for living our lives in relation to everyone around us. He tells us in the parable that the love of God is for everyone, and if we seek to be Jesus' followers we must, genuinely, see everyone we encounter as our neighbour.



Of course, this is easier to say than it is to do; it needs to become 'inviscerated', made a part of us, if we are to view others instinctively as 'our neighbour', rather than to view them with suspicion until they prove they prove themselves to be 'safe'. As with so much of Jesus' teaching, he sets a very high standard to which we ought to aspire, but we need not let ourselves be discouraged if we don't always meet the standard, but we should be dogged in pursuit of it. In the meantime, we ought not to judge the lawyer, the priest or the Levite too harshly, because they are not so very different from us, and they too, and people like them today, are still our neighbours.

Clive Lemmon