

Pentecost 8 – St Aidan's – 14th July 2013

Reading: Luke 10:25-37 'The Good Samaritan'

Questions asked – 'Who is my neighbour and who proved to be a neighbour?'

Introduction

I love this section of Scripture because every time I read it and read around it to find some pieces for a sermon I get a slightly different slant on the story. That is one of the joys of Scripture that you can find something new, even in a well-known passage, when you re-read and study it.

Here in the inter-change between Jesus and the ecclesiastical lawyer, two gulfs are exposed. One is between theory and practice, and the other between law and grace. These are gulfs which are a cause of soul searching by sincere believers, and the ground for debate among those who are trying to minimise their responsibilities.

I recall sharing with a first year university student who thought he would major in philosophy. That intent did not last for long. He changed direction. As he explained to me: "I did not feel like spending so much of my energy among teachers who were keen to talk but very slow to act." His judgement was no doubt unfair to some of the teaching staff but much of philosophy is very esoteric and not based in practicalities. He wanted to make a difference in the world and so changed courses to something he thought would be of more use in the world – in this instance he chose social work.

As a nineteen year old he was keen to make a difference.

The sad fact is, that most of us who have bumped around in life for a while, and gathered significant bruises and abrasions, become more willing to talk about issues than make commitments. We tend to become theoreticians rather than practitioners.

Jesus was a young man who looked for commitment and for action. The Jewish lawyer wanted a debate, a kind of mental tennis match to use an analogy from the sporting world for those who have recently been watching Wimbledon.

Middle

The lawyer served with a fast, curving ball: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Calmly Jesus returns the ball back to him with the questions: "What is written in the religious law? What do you read there?" This fellow has no alternative but to return the ball down the centre of the court:

"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 love your neighbour as yourself."

Certainly the lawyer is astute. He makes the connection between loving God and loving others. He is well aware that love of God and love of your fellow human beings were inextricably bound together.

Truly loving others brings you nearer to God and truly loving God must bring you nearer to others. The lawyer has the theory correct.

However Jesus returns the ball right back at the lawyer's feet by saying: "Right, do this and you will live." Jesus, the man of action says 'do this'.

However the lawyer sees an opening and volleys at Jesus: "Ah! But who is my neighbour?" The lawyer doesn't want action, he wants legal clarification and Jesus tells the story of the bloke who gets mugged, is robbed and about the three men who come past him.

Notice that no names are used, only categories of people in this story. We know the story. A priest (that is a religious leader) then a Levite (a lay associate of a religious leader) and finally a hated half breed of a Samaritan (a foreigner despised by the Jews) came by the mugged man. Only the despised character bothers to care for the one who has been mugged. The other two walk by on the other side of the road not wanting to defile themselves or get involved.

From the story Jesus volleys back the question to the lawyer: "Which of these three do you think was neighbour to the man who was robbed?"

The lawyer's response was a soft, face saving return: "The one who showed mercy on him." Jesus then hits a clean winner for game, set and match: "Go and do likewise."

Conclusion

In the whole encounter, Jesus has kept to the point of doing the right deed rather than trying to define the boundaries of love's operation. In doing so he discards the theoretical question of 'But who is my neighbour?' and applies the practical: 'To whom can I be a neighbour?!' Who or what the other person is, does not in any way define the boundaries of loving. Their race, gender, marital status, skin colour, education, political preference, religious affiliation, age are all irrelevant.

Naturally this can be transposed to our society today and we can be challenged by Jesus' story and put it into our own setting.

The Samaritan could be an aboriginal person or a boat refugee, a Muslim from Afghanistan. The Priest or the Levite could be a sixth generation Anglo-Australian!

Let me finish with words from Bruce Prewer's book 'Beyond Words – reflections on the Gospel of Luke' (page 34)

The Samaritan

As I was coming home through life some muggers hit me hard, they stripped me of the things most dear then left me by the road.

A State M.P. came down that way, saw me in such need; 'The times are tough', he sadly said, 'Our budget can't provide'.

The news crews found me bloodied, the cameras zoomed in near; the producer said, 'That's great T.V.' and left me lying there.

A stranger came down to the place and bandaged up my wounds, he gave me oil and gave me wine and placed me in good hands.

The muggers took him down the road and beat him mercilessly; they crowned him with some barbed wire and hanged him on a tree.

Is this a parable not merely about a Samaritan but what it may mean to follow Christ? Amen.