Who is my neighbour?

Deutoronomy 30:11-14, Luke 10:25-37

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One of the central spiritual practices of the ancient order of St Benedict was the so-called *Lectio Divina,* a kind of meditative, prayerful reading of Scripture. The Bible was not treated just as a text to be studied, its stories were not primarily taken as historical accounts, rather the monks were encouraged to enter them imaginatively, visualizing themselves in the middle of the action, perhaps taking up the roles of the characters and experiencing the story from the inside, as it were. The purpose was to lead the participants from the literal reading through a spiritual journey to a deeper understanding of God and themselves. This is still practiced today, but even those of us who do not use it consciously, find ourselves doing it when encountering a Biblical passage, or story. We instinctively take up a position in the unfolding narrative and decide on the meaning from that particular angle.

The parable of the Good Samaritan lends itself brilliantly to this kind of imaginative meditation. Traditionally, we have been used to seeing the action from the point of view of the Samaritan, who, against all the odds, and in quite a shocking way does the right thing; he comes to the rescue of a half-dead fellow human being, who is, in fact, his enemy. His action stands out in an even shaper relief against the background of two members of the religious establishment, who do not help but pass by on the other side. The meaning is clear: the followers of Jesus are called to love and help everyone in need regardless of their creed or colour, their religion, nationality or social standing. The body of Christ is to be a "zone of grace" that fundamentally challenges all the barriers ", that divide us from others, to paraphrase Simon Barrow in the Catalyst magazine. As good Christians, we know this, but if we are honest we also know that most of the time we are unable to live up to this standard.

But what if we try to identify with the man in the ditch, for example, the person stripped of all his possessions, his physical powers, his human dignity, being in absolute need, entirely dependent on others. This becomes a bit harder. Even if we can't live fully up to the example of the Samaritan, he is closer to our own self-image. In a sense, he stands for freedom and independence; he is self-sufficient and has the means to act generously. He has all the blessings, in fact, we enjoy as members of an affluent Western society. The question for the Samaritan and for us in this scenario is, will he help, will we help – and how far are we willing to go? But, what could we have in common with the victim of the story? Are we in any kind of need at all to be able to put ourselves in his place? Of course, we do experience the odd spell of dependence on others when we are ill, or in hospital, or being incapacitated for any length of time, and if we are fortunate, only for a short time at the very end of our lives, but on the whole, we do live with the myth of being in control of our own destiny and the freedom to act as we choose.

The recently popular mindfulness exercises may be of some interest here. One way of doing this is to spend, say, a day, when from the moment of our waking to our retiring for the night we remind ourselves of the many, many ways in which we are all dependent on others. (Karen Armstrong: *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life).* We can remember those, who planted, picked and spun the cotton of our sheets and who collected, treated and exported the beans for our morning coffee; The people, who baked the bread for our slice of toast, and those who grew the oranges for our marmalade. As we sit in our cars or on the train and as we pass great construction sites, roadworks or amazing new buildings, or push our supermarket trolleys around, we can remember the thousands of workers and engineers who designed and built them. If we have a doctor's appointment locally, or in a hospital we can remember how we are reliant on the thousands of nurses, carers, porters, doctors coming perhaps from the other side of the world to serve us. All good examples of our general interdependence, but if we imagine ourselves as the half-dead man in the parable, or one of the tens of thousands of refugees in a temporary camp in the Middle-East now, our question is could it be that the one we regard as our enemy turns out to be our saviour? Looking at it this way, we realise just how revolutionary this story was in Jesus' time and still is in our time.

Putting ourselves in the roles of the priest and the Levite gives us yet other different perspectives, from which to appreciate this story. The question the priest raises for us would be: can our obedience to God's Holy Law as we understand it prevent us from truly loving our neighbour? The answer sadly is that it can. How often are our churches criticised for being so pre-occupied with being The Church that we have no time or energy left to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world? The Levites were there at the Temple to assist the priests and the assumption is that the Levite in the parable passes by on the other side because the priest does so before him. Imagining ourselves in his character our question may be, do we look to others, people of religious authority perhaps to tell us how to behave, whom to care for and whom to ignore?

And finally, what would it be like to be in the skin of the instigator of this marvellous parable, the person our reading calls a lawyer? Of course he wasn't really a lawyer in our sense of the word. He was a religious scholar trained in the study and exposition of the Law of Moses that governed the religious life of Israel. So, are we like this lawyer, who comes to Jesus perhaps not merely to test him, or to justify himself, as Luke would have it, but to debate with Jesus out of genuine interest a rather burning theological issue according to accepted rabbinic practice; A practice of reading Scripture together, discussing and debating its meaning sometimes

through quite heated arguments which, has always been and still is an important part of Jewish spirituality. Karen Armstrong, a former RC nun and a well-known religious author writes about this in her book *The Spiral Staircase.* She recalls her first ever visit to the Holy Land, where she encountered a so-called *yeshiva,* which was a kind of Rabbinic School where the Torah and the Talmud (the Jewish equivalents of our Old and New Testament) were studied. As she watched the students she realised that for them their study, the pouring over of the sacred texts together was not a barren, cerebral exercise, it was more like worship that brought them into the presence of God.

For someone like me, who feels quite strongly that studying Scripture, discussing and questioning our faith together is important this is certainly an appealing and encouraging approach. Some of you may remember that during our centenary celebrations in 2007 we had a very imaginative prayer day set out here in our Church. There were different 'prayer stations' for people to use and one of them was a coffee table set out with two chairs and an invitation: If you could sit here with Jesus over a cup of coffee, what would you want to talk with him about? As I sat at that table I realised what an amazing opportunity it would be to be able to discuss matters of faith with the originator of that faith cutting through the 2000 years that stand between him and us. Jesus welcomed questions, he was more than willing to engage in discussion about life and faith and Scripture. That's what he was doing in today's reading. So, whether we look at the scholar in the negative light the Gospel writer presents him or, give him the benefit of the doubt as an honest seeker, Jesus does take him seriously. He accepts the question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?", and enters its premise in the polemic, rabbinic manner by answering with a question of his own: "What is written in the Law?" I find the second part of Jesus' question particularly noteworthy: *What is your reading of it?* The assumption is that there can be more than one way of reading even God's Holy Law as given in Scripture. So, when we hear sayings like, 'The Bible clearly says…' it is legitimate to ask, 'according to whose reading?'

Then we hear Jesus' reading of it although Luke puts the crucial sentence on the lips of the scholar: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." We may notice two things about this summary of the Law. The first is that it puts together two OT quotations one from Deuteronomy (6:6-9) and one from Leviticus (19:18). And the second is that in both Mark's and Matthew's Gospel (pre-dating Luke) it is Jesus who gives this summary and it is his innovation to tie together these two commandments into one, which had not been done before him.

Well, before we say more about this, let's just hear the scholar's second question and see if we discover ourselves in it: "But who is my neighbour?" he asks and significantly at this point Jesus leaves the theoretical level of debate and answers by a down-to-earth, everyday story with a twist in it. The scholar's question and our question, - whether we say it out loud or not – is how to use our compassion within manageable proportions. How much is enough and how much is too much? But these are wrong questions focusing on ourselves, on our needs and expectations in this world and the next. They are based on US and THEM. For Jesus the person in need is in the focus and the way to eternal life, (not a heavenly after-life) but true life in the here and now lived with God, is the way of unself-conscious compassion towards those in need.

Now, you know how our computers are so much better at spelling and grammar then we are. The mistake most often corrected by my computer is my use of commas and semicolons. Of course, I have a good excuse, but I am sure it happens to you as well. Apparently, in some translations of the Bible the two parts of the great commandment: love of God and love of neighbour are divided by a semicolon, whereas in others they are divided by a comma. Semicolon is used, when in a list there is a separation, a qualitative difference between two items, a comma separates items of equal value. From the way Jesus brings together the two commandments it seems the comma is the right punctuation mark here. We cannot love God without loving our neighbour in Christ's way, and we cannot truly love our neighbour unless we trace God's face in them. The Good news comes from the OT reading: *This commandment is not too difficult for you, or beyond your reach…It is a thing very near to you, on your lips and in your heart ready to be kept.* May God's Spirit help us to find it and keep it.

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