



14th July 2019
Luke 10.25-37

The Wrong Hero

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

Today's lectionary gospel – the story of the Good Samaritan – must be one of the best-known parts of the Bible.

I think it's a tale Shakespeare would have been proud of. It's the sort of dramatic morsel he liked to drop into his work to keep the 'groundlings' happy, those who paid the least for a ticket and stood to watch the performance. This group needed humour and surprise and of course you get both in this story. It's laughable that a priest and Levite walk by on the other side and a jaw dropping surprise that a Samaritan, an outsider, becomes the hero of the hour. It's yet another example of the upside-down teaching of Jesus. To some in the audience it must have verged on the edge of good taste, to others it was almost blasphemous and to most it was surely a truly shocking story.

They would not, I guess, have been shocked about the beating up of the one walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. That 20-mile journey, almost all of it downhill – was notoriously dangerous. And perhaps many in the crowd listening to Jesus would have had little sympathy for the traveller. Maybe they became quite smug and thought he should have known better – after all this was a trip no sane person would ever undertake alone. If you're travelling from Jerusalem always go to Jericho in a group. A lone traveller, well that was simply asking for trouble and maybe some thought he deserved what came to him.

Here, then, are a few observations from a somewhat over familiar narrative – and the first is that this story is surely the wrong way round.

The shock and affront in the narrative is the arrival of the Samaritan as a saviour. If anyone other than Jesus had been telling the story the Samaritan would have been presented in stereo typical terms as the bad guy. He would have arrived to see that all had gone well with the mugging, to pick up the last of the spoils. Instead, as we all know, he is the hero and the priest and the Levite are the vacuous hypocrites.

If the story was intended to be an example of neighbourliness then surely it could have achieved its purpose with everything being the otherway round.

The Samaritan, someone thought of by the listeners as 'not one of us', is beaten up and robbed. A Jew, best of all a priestly one, puts aside all prejudice and tends his wounds.

This is love in action and fuses together those two great commandments about loving God and serving others into a solid piece of down to earth compassion.

Job done, point made and audience happy.

But, this is not the story Jesus told.

Maybe that is because this multi layered narrative is actually more than just a parable about neighbourliness. It is also a challenge about the 'means of grace'.

What I mean by that is this. Where do we expect to meet God and encounter goodness?

I grew up in a culture that was almost entirely 'Christian' in that my set of friends went to 'Christian' concerts, attended 'Christian' holidays, read 'Christian' books and belonged to 'Christian' Unions at school. In many ways I'm immensely grateful for all the support and encouragement I found in these events and amongst these people. Yet, upon reflection, I realise now that my world view back in those days was very much that God and goodness was to be found almost exclusively in 'Christian' based activities. God was with us, with 'our' kind of church and in 'our' kind of beliefs.

Of course, all this possession taking of the divine meant that God and goodness was certainly not to be found in other churches or institutions.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that the notion of God and the idea of goodness isn't restricted to a particular tribe or tradition and can be found, as a means of grace, in the most unexpected people and places, in the 'other'.

I was recently re-reading the centenary history of our church. The Revd Neville Clark, who left the pastorate here to become Principal of the South Wales Baptist Theological College, wasn't too keen on many activities being held in the church rooms when the building was brought into use in 1962. Under his benevolent dictatorship it was basically restricted to Sunday Services and Women's Meetings.

It's easy to scoff at that restriction until we remember what Neville Clark was striving to teach the congregation back in those days. Surely it was this, that God is to be both encountered and served outside as well as inside the church. So, his way of discipling went like this: Worship together on a Sunday and then live out the faith at work and society Monday to Saturday.

Times have changed as well as room usage here at AFC, but there is still much wisdom in that paradigm. God is bigger than Church and can be both found and served on a larger canvass.

You see, the story would have been a good one if the Jew had bound the wounds of the Samaritan, but I suggest it becomes a great one because it's the injured Jew who encounters God, as a means of grace, through the generosity of spirit he finds in a passing Samaritan.

It's all the wrong way round, as are many things in the topsy turvey world of The Kingdom of God.

Do we see God at work in the lives of other seekers after truth from different denominations and religions? Can we in any sense hear a call from God in the search for tolerance in the meetings of the Beyond Difference Interfaith Group? Can we respect that he is at work in those who voted the opposite way to us in Brexit? All of these questions can find a prompt in the gospel story before us today. A challenge to encounter God and goodness in 'the

other', and to rejoice in it whenever we do.

Now here's a second observation this morning about a misplaced effort.

I suspect everyone in the crowd listening to this story knew good Levites and Priests. These groups were frontline players in temple worship. The Levites were often in charge of the music making and the priests stood on holy ground, handled holy things and spoke holy words. No wonder neither of them, in the story, wanted to either be late or invalidate their appointment for temple duty in Jerusalem.

However, Jesus, the subversive story teller, is provocatively asking us, his listeners, to re-evaluate our practises and procedures.

These two religious professionals would have spent years mastering their craft, yet here on this road, when confronted by this crisis, they pass by on the other side.

We often hear people extol the virtues of 'commitment' and call for more of it. If only, they say, more people were committed then my club, my team, my organisation could go places, grow bigger or win medals.

I've no doubt that in today's story this was a very committed Priest and an equally committed Levite. The question, though, is surely this: what were they really committed to? And is being committed to a rule book, a constitution or a tradition the same as being committed to God and neighbour? Jesus seems to be saying 'no'. Theirs was a misplaced effort.

In the history of The Church there have been times when we, too, have misplaced our efforts. In the Slave Trade era churches in the west of England around ports such as Bristol, often grew rich and beautiful on the proceeds of the triangular trade until prophets like Wilberforce woke them up. In Germany the Church acquiesced alongside the rise of Fascism until prophets like Bonhoeffer found their voice. In the USA many churches thought it was just inevitable that segregation should be based on colour until prophets like Luther King found the poetry to inspire a different world view.

We can be very committed to the wrong things. The parable of the Good Samaritan doesn't ask for a commitment to religious ritual or the dogma of religious tradition, instead it honours the one whose love went beyond the boundaries of convention and whose compassion overstepped the suffocating restrictions of prejudice.

Well, the third observation I want to make this morning from this very well-known story is that sometimes we love best by accepting the care of others.

In the story the Samaritan did all he could in the sticking plaster section of the story. He was the first on the scene to offer help, he bandaged up the Jew's wounds and put him on his donkey. That was stage one of the recovery process. Stage two was different. He left the wounded traveller at the inn for recuperation and before he left, paid the bill.

He paid for someone else, who had the time and facilities, to be part of the healing process.

Now isn't that a wonderfully down to earth part of the story. And, I suspect in so many pastoral situations today, it can actually be one of the most comforting and encouraging

parts of the narrative.

Some, perhaps many of us, in church this morning will have known the dilemma that often comes a family's way when it's time to consider a 'care home' for someone we love.

I remember the weight of responsibility that fell upon my mother and I as we searched for the right home for my grandmother once my grandfather had passed away.

Entrusting someone you love, because of age, dementia, mental or physical illness, to someone else's care can be tough and traumatic. Not always, but sometimes, it is the best way.

We couldn't look after my grandmother, yet I know those who did look after her for the final couple of years of her life, did so with exemplary kindness and respect which made her content and at peace.

John Bell, of the Iona Community, has a hymn with the opening line: The love of God comes close....and in that hymn he outlines the variety of ways God's love, grace, compassion and kindness kisses our lives. And sometimes, as in the part played by the innkeeper in today's story, that love comes close through paid, professional care.

This parable is multi-layered. It speaks of unexpectedly finding God in 'the other, of the danger of being over committed to routine and ritual at the expense of compassion, and finally of the necessity, at times, of entrusting those we love to the care of others and doing that as an expression of our ongoing love for them.

Let me close with a story of the Saturday morning I encountered my own Good Samaritan. We were on holiday in Australia with two small children and had only arrived the day before. We were on the station platform trying to buy a ticket to Brisbane Central. The ticket vending machine only took change. This being our first day we only had large denomination notes in our pockets. As I fumbled with the machine a teenager came up to me. To be truthful I was rather shocked by what he did next. He saw my predicament, and using that wonderful Australian phrase 'No worries', used his own change to buy us four tickets, flatly refusing that I reimburse him with some notes.

It was the most wonderful and unexpected of welcomes. After five weeks we returned home with no more beautiful memory than that of this young man coming over to help us on that railway platform on our first day.

God's love and goodness can come to us in some wonderfully shocking ways, may it be so this week for you, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Ian Green Amersham 10th July 2019