

Luke 10.25-37

13th July 2025

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.

By not asking too many questions about the traditions by which they felt bound, we respond, perhaps unfairly, with incredulity that a priest and Levite walks by on the other side. Yet, it's obvious in this context that it was a jaw dropping surprise that a Samaritan, an outsider, becomes the hero of the hour. The upside-down teaching of Jesus. Indeed, to some, it might have verged on the edge of good taste.

As to the traveller in the story, well, didn't he have it coming to him? For this 20 mile journey from Jerusalem to Jericho, almost all of it downhill, was notoriously dangerous. He should have known better and taken better precautions.

This is a great story in that it feeds into the listener's preconceptions and prejudices and then overturns them with the obvious villain of the piece transformed into an unexpected hero. Jesus would surely have earned top marks if this had been his submission in a creative writing class. It has everything a good narrative needs and shows what a brilliant storyteller Jesus was.

What then, do we make of it?

Of course, it's the wrong way round! And that's to do with the shock and affrontery of the arrival of the Samaritan as a saviour. To Jesus' listeners the expectation would have been to present the Samaritan in stereo typical terms as the bad guy. You can imagine how it might, or indeed should, have gone. The Samaritan would have arrived to see that all had gone well with the mugging, which he had arranged, and now he picks up the spoils.

Or, here's another possibility. If the story was intended to be an example of neighbourliness, then surely it could have achieved its purpose with everything being the other way round. The Samaritan, the foreigner, someone who was 'other', is robbed. Then a priest or a Levite, definitely 'one of us', puts prejudice to one side and tends his wounds.

Job done, point made and audience happy, and a player from the home team, either the priest or Levite, takes all the glory. But this is not the story Jesus told.

On one level this is a very effective parable about neighbourliness. And part of that is its challenge in asking us this important question: *Where do we expect to meet God and encounter goodness?*

Looking back, I realise now that I grew up in a culture that was almost entirely 'Christian'. By that I mean my set of friends went to 'Christian' concerts, attended 'Christian' holidays, read 'Christian' books and belonged to 'Christian' Unions at school. And in so 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.

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 in the most unexpected people and places, in the 'other'.

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 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 turvy world of The Kingdom of God.

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 storyteller, 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, a constitution or a tradition the same as being committed to God and neighbour? Jesus at least seems to be raising questions here about where we put our effort.

In the history of The Church there have been times when we, too, have misplaced our efforts. At times we in the Church have been very committed to slavery and racial segregation.

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 is that sometimes we love best when we accept the care of others. Indeed, it might be argued that this is, in fact the main point of the story. My neighbour, says Jesus, is the one who helps me.

In the story the Samaritan did all he could in the sticking plaster section of the events. He was the first on the scene to offer help, he bandaged up the Jew's wounds and put him on his donkey. But that was just 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' or 'package' 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, whether that's residential care, or care at home.

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 touches 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 reflection on today's parable from a chat around the table at last week's Tea at Three here at church. A group of us were discussing The Good Samaritan and we mentioned it was today's lectionary reading. A regular guest at Tea at Three, someone who I don't think goes to church, immediately said this parable reminds him of the founding of the Red Cross. We all sat there intrigued, and he told us the story of Henry Dunant, a Swiss businessmen and committed Christian who witnessed the Battle of Solferino, near Lake Garda, in Italy. He was horrified by the way thousands of French and Prussian soldiers were left dying and unattended on the battlefield. The French didn't want to care for the Prussians and vice versa. To Henry Dunant they were all human beings and deserved dignity and compassion. He organised hundreds of volunteers from the village to help him tend to the dying, regardless of what side they were on. That was the key – regardless of their nationality all deserved care.

Once home he helped form the Red Cross on 17th February 1863 and was party to establishing the Geneva Convention, one principle of it being Impartiality. Dunant was awarded the very first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.

Well, perhaps Tea at Three should be renamed Tea and Theology at Three! It was great to have that conversation.

The Red Cross and The Red Crescent are, in so many ways, living embodiments of this ancient story.

God's love comes to us through neighbours. And as neighbours we are called to both offer and receive that love.

So, this week may we be wonderfully shocked by such loving moments of kindness and compassion, wherever, and from whoever, they come.

In the name of God, who constantly surprises.

Amen.