Sermon for St Botolph's Church. 6 September 2020.

Galatians 3. 16-22; Luke 10. 23-37 The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus's Parable of the Good Samaritan, of a man who freely and generously gave to a complete stranger and rescued him from probable death, is one of his most loved and famous parables. It has certainly given a good name and great press to Samaritans – today a good Samaritan is *anyone* who generously helps someone else in need and as such will be acclaimed by Society. Samaritans in New Testament times, however, were not well thought-of at all by respectable Jews. They inhabited (and indeed still inhabit – some small communities of Samaritans survive to this day) an area between Judaea (around Jerusalem) and Galilee. They were a hybrid people – an admixture of survivors of the Northern Israelite kingdom and assorted pagans brought in by the Assyrians and subsequent conquerors to repopulate the region, and they practised a hybrid form of Judaism, accepting only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, as canonical and Moses as the only prophet. They had their own Temple on Mount Gerizim, mostly destroyed by the Jews 150 years before Jesus. They were a heterodox people with a heterodox version of Judaism and as such were despised and shunned by religious Jews – witness the amazement of the Woman of Samaria described in John Chapter 4 when Jesus, a Jew, actually spoke to her.

The context of the parable is a question posed to Jesus by a lawyer, *"Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* Luke tells us that his motives for asking the question were not good - he was "tempting", testing Jesus. As a professional lawyer (we must think religious law not civil law), he had no doubt spent years studying, discussing, learning the Law of Moses and no doubt he hoped to trip up this annoying, itinerant preacher with little formal education on some point, so that he could show his teaching was inconsistent with received Jewish religion. Moreover, he asked the wrong question - *"What shall, I **do** to inherit eternal life?"* He was wedded to a religion of works, of ***doing*** the right thing, of obeying the letter of the Law to win God's favour – more on that later.

In answer to the question, Jesus surprises the lawyer by turning the tables on him, *"What is written in the Law. How readest thou?"* And the lawyer is worth his salt – he gives a succinct and pithy summary of the whole Law. It is all about loving God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and loving your neighbour as yourself. The Law was set up to regulate and codify the relations on the one hand between God and his covenant people and on the other hand between one person within the chosen race and any other. The people were to love God by worshipping Him, sacrificing to Him (in the sense both of giving up things and of making offerings), obeying Him. And they were to *love*, care for, help each other – to do this, a whole set of rules about relationship, property, honesty and so on were put in place, including regulations for setting the people apart from those around them.

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? I believe it means each individual human being is meant to be an image, an icon, a picture of God, in order to reflect God back to others and to God himself and to our environment and the created world. We are designed to relate in a God-like, loving, beneficent way. The famous two commandments are an excellent summary both of what the Old Testament Law was all about and of the way we humans, as 'images' of God, are supposed to behave towards God and towards each other.

Jesus, of course, also used this summary of the Law himself. He said all the Law and the prophets *hung* on the two commands to love God and to love your neighbour. And he said to the lawyer, *"This do and thou shalt live".* More easily said than done, of course.

The lawyer, suitably discombobulated, tried another tack – who exactly is my neighbour? And hence the parable.

Many years ago, on a tourist bus, I "went down from Jerusalem to Jericho". You travel through a very barren and desolate and rocky, very mountainous, essentially desert, country with few dwellings in evidence – what there were were mostly tents. Eventually you come to an amazing vista of the Rift Valley way below you and at this point go past a rather disconcerting sign, 'Sea Level'. Jerusalem is high in the hills, Jericho is near the Dead Sea, 1300 feet below sea level. It was apparent on my journey that there were plenty of suitable places for the ambush of a lone traveller. So, in this story, the poor man is set upon, knocked about, stripped and left half-dead in the ditch. He wouldn't have lasted long in the sun.

In the story along came first a priest and then a Levite. Because they passed by on the other side, having spotted the wounded, probably semi-conscious, man, they have been seen as arch-baddies by posterity – callous, uncaring, amazingly selfish. But, of course, these were religious men. The priests had important duties in the Temple. The Levites were descendants of Levi, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, designated by God through Moses to be distributed among all the other tribes to maintain religion and help in God's service. It has been suggested, plausibly, that they were probably on their way to perform some important religious function. Should they have touched the man and got his blood on themselves, they would have become ritually unclean, which would severely have delayed and hampered the performance of those duties. They stand, therefore, not only as an example of people who don't stop to help, who ignore suffering and need for selfish reasons, but also as an example of people who put religious duty before alleviating distress. It is so easy to say, I haven't got time to help because I am so busy on the Lord's work, to prioritise religious observance or service or witness over someone's or some community's obvious, immediate need. It is easy to use religion as an excuse. It may be that the lawyer in this story, aware of all the rules about ritual cleanliness, may have understood and even approved of the reaction of the priest and the Levite in the parable.

But along came a Samaritan, a member of a despised, belittled, shunned minority. Samaritans would not have been considered part of the covenant people of Israel – the Law was set out to regulate and codify relations between members of the covenant people. O.K., you were supposed to be nice to the stranger and sojourner in the land, but their presence in the Israelite community didn't make them Israelites, subject to the Law and so entitled to the protection of the Law. The fact that it was a *Samaritan* in the story, who turned out to be the rescuer of the man who had fallen among thieves, would have been disturbing to the lawyer. It would have been like an IRA terrorist helping an Ulster Orangeman. If a Samaritan could help a Jew, then obviously a Jew should help a Samaritan – "*Go and do thou likewise".* In Romans 12, St Paul writes, *"Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head".*

The obvious lesson of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that everyone and anyone can be your neighbour – not just someone you know, from your locality, or someone with whom you share a common heritage or culture, or a co-religionist, or whatever. Anyone that we see in need ought to arouse our compassion (the Samaritan, Luke tells us, saw the man "*and had compassion on him"*). Of course, we can't help everyone, we have to balance our resources, our circumstances, our ability to help with each perceived need. I am sure we could all think of a myriad of examples of need and it might not always, or even often, be right for us to try and help. But, where we obviously can, we obviously should.

However, the Parable of the Good Samaritan has another message, and that is about the real meaning of *love*. Love God, love your neighbour, love your enemy, love one another, love your spouse or your partner or your parents or your children or your friends – what is *real* love? Love is essentially self-sacrifice, *giving* to the loved one. In the Christian tradition the epitome of love is Jesus's self-sacrifice for us. "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends". That famous verse is written on so many war memorials that we forget that, in context, it refers to *Jesus's* willingness to die on the cross for *our* sakes, to bring about forgiveness for *our* sins, the ultimate self-sacrifice. To love someone is to be willing to give things to them – actually we delight in giving presents to those we really love – is to be willing to give things up for them, is to be willing to make time, to use resources, physical, mental, spiritual, material, emotional, for the sake of someone else, or, of course, for the sake of God. And the Good Samaritan epitomised this self-sacrificial love. He gave up his time to get down in the ditch to help, to bind up the wounds, to walk to the inn, letting the injured man ride on his beast. He used his money and his belongings (he used oil to sooth and wine as an antiseptic on the wounds) without any thought of recompense. He sacrificed his time and his resources – in a sense he is a type of Christ, willing to give up anything and everything for the sake of another.

I said at the start that I would come back to the original question asked by the lawyer, *"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus had said, in effect, you must be totally self-sacrificial, giving freely of everything you have for anyone, anyone at all. Clearly, this is impossible to do. The lawyer asked about a way to life and is answered by a parable about a way *of* life, a parable about what love and self-sacrifice really mean. We can do our best to live a life of love but we will all fail, we will all fall short of the ultimate standard of perfect love, we will all sin. We can never do enough, can never be good enough to merit heaven. In our epistle reading from Galatians, Paul wrote, *"But the scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe"* (Gal.3.22, NIV). Jesus, by his supreme self-sacrifice for us, wiped away our sin – all we need is faith that that is true and acceptance that we can't save ourselves. The Parable of the Good Samaritan then becomes not a pattern of how we are to *earn* eternal life – Christianity is *not* a religion of doing, of helping, of serving, of sacrificing in order to win salvation, but a pattern of the sort of behaviour that should characterise those who *have been* saved, a way *of* life, not a way *to* life.

Rev'd Dr Jonathan Holmes
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