

You would expect a lawyer to want to get the details right. Too often human gatherings, like institutions, legislatures and constitutions have been jeopardised, or at least made more complicated, because a detail was not sorted, a consequence unforeseen. Decisions we take, especially within organisations made up of human beings trying to do things for other human beings, can have ramifications which last long into the future. Those who committed us to a referendum on the European Union, and those who voted in it, probably did not intend that we should be where we are at the moment, and it will take a lot of political will and a massive amount of bureaucracy to sort the details and move us on.

It works in smaller ways too. I had a conversation this week about the decisions taken by PCCs which remain the policy of the church, but which few people remember, like those laws which say you can shoot a Scot in York after dark. We can give thanks for the wisdom of our predecessors in an organisation which is well founded and whose statutes give freedom to adapt to new ways. You may also, perhaps, have cause to curse those who have saddled you with a way of doing things which they did not intend, but which prevents you doing almost everything you want to do. So organisations pay lawyers and get advice to ensure that, where absolutely possible, when a decision is taken and a ruling made, the details are right, the law is sound, the constitution is robust and the future is as secure as possible.

It is a lawyer who is talking to Jesus the teacher in Luke 10. He wants to know how the future can be secured, how the risk can be managed, the exposure hedged, the inheritance sealed, the unforeseen consequences mitigated. "What must I do to be given eternal life?" Good question, especially for a lawyer, whom most people might expect to have more of a probability of going to the other place. And there is a legal answer from Jesus: what do you read? What are the precedents? There are statutes all over the place. The lawyer gives a superb judicial summing up. "Love God. Love your neighbour". Jesus commends him for it.

But he's a lawyer, and having clarified the judgement, the big picture, he needs to know the boundaries of the judgement – the people to whom it applies. 'Define "neighbour, then" says the lawyer. If I'm to do this properly I need to know the extent of my sphere of influence. Time and money are precious, and it would be dreadful to waste my attention on someone who, it is later proved, is not my neighbour at all. Give me the definition.'

What follows is one of the most recognisable stories Jesus told, and one of the most challenging, however familiar it may be. The person rescued from bloody pain and helplessness finds that his saviour is not a cleric or a churchwarden but a hated foreigner, one whom he would not only pass by on the other side himself, but probably try to take a different road altogether to avoid. The last person you'd expect. The challenge though is not that Jesus uses this to define the extent of 'neighbourness'. He turns everything upside down. Who, if this is a word, 'neighboured' the victim? To whom are you a neighbour? There is no limit to being a neighbour, no one who falls outside our neighbourly care.

The question is not about where our neighbourliness stops, but where it starts. Mrs Thatcher famously said of this parable that the Samaritan needed to have generated his

wealth before he could do the good deed, which didn't go down that well in the reasonably left leaning General Assembly of the Church of Scotland at the time she said it. (Look up 'Sermon on the Mound' if you want to know more). What strikes me as more important is that the Samaritan chose to use his material wealth to make a difference. It was entirely possible for him to walk by on the other side. Indeed, even in his wounded state it is what the mugged man would have expected. He might not even have regarded the Samaritan as a fellow member of society, such was the division. But the Samaritan actively crossed the divide, responded to the immediate emergency, and then put plans in place for the future.

This speaks on a number of levels right now. All over the country people from different ethnic groups are being abused. It could be a Polish surname, different coloured skin, or distinctive dress. You are their neighbour. Where the abuse is on social media it needs pointing out and reporting. Where it is in your sight and hearing it can be more difficult to know what to do, but you can be active. Two pieces of advice I will remember. If you have a phone which films, then film it. And if a person is being abused and you would be in danger if you challenged the abuser, go and stand with the abused person. Simply have a conversation with them. Don't face the abuser, stand with the abused. Show that they belong. Another way of indicating this is to wear a safety pin, to show that you are a safe person to be with.

Almost everyone whose funeral I have taken has been described to me as someone who would help anyone. Well, we all would, wouldn't we, if asked? It takes a little more than that to be a person who sets out to be a neighbour, who doesn't wait until the matter is obvious but thinks actively. Somethings simply take a reaction: there's a crisis, so money or goods can be sent. And some things take a longer term reaction: the Samaritan responds to eth crisis and then sustains the man's long term future. Some things need an organisation, an agency. Sometimes being a neighbour takes a lifetime. Our nation is being faced with the question right now about who we want to be and how we want to relate to the world. One Prime Ministerial candidate says the ambition is to be the best nation in the world. That sounds too competitive to me, unless it's the best in helping, the best in serving, the best in giving.

Being a neighbour starts with the smallest things, which lead to the transformation of the greatest things. It is no good throwing up our hands and saying that the world is so complex that we don't know where to begin. In answer to the lawyer's question Jesus said that there was no limit to neighbouring. So how will you do what the Samaritan did? What divides will you cross? And whom will you love, in Jesus's name? Amen.