

# The Good Samaritan

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*Deuteronomy 30: 9-14; Luke 10: 25-37*

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That's the question that lies behind the parable of the Good Samaritan and it's one of those BIG questions: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The trouble is, I fear, it's not a question many people today are asking - in my 25 years of ordained ministry, I don't think anyone has EVER asked me, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Big questions are out of fashion. We no longer ask questions about the meaning of life, we're so busy being shaped by advertising and social media and, dare I say it, Love Island. We never stop to ask the big questions anymore: Who am I? What am I doing here? How can I be happy? How can I live well? What must I do to inherit eternal life?

And when Jesus is asked this big question, the conversation quickly turns to God. And I think although we don't put our big questions into words. I don't think that means they go away - we just suppress them. But they're still there lurking at the back of our minds. And when Jesus addresses this question, the lawyer and he quickly agree that at the heart of the teaching of the Old Testament is the idea that it's all about loving God and loving your neighbour. And not just loving God and loving your neighbour, but you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.

I want to suggest this morning that that is simply too much: it's overwhelming; it's actually impossible. None of us loves God with all our heart, with all our soul, all our strength and all our mind - at least not all the time. Which may be why so often people latch on to the concept of loving our neighbour, and try to make out that that's what Christianity is really about. "I'm a good person," we say, "I do my best - I'd lend my lawnmower to the lady next door any day". And so the lawyer zeroes in on this idea of

loving his neighbour as himself, in a desperate attempt at damage limitation. If loving God with every fibre of his being is too much to expect, maybe he can place some boundaries around this idea of neighbour-love, and make it more manageable. Maybe he can narrow it down and shrink it to manageable proportions and limit this category of neighbour down to just a few people: maybe his family; or the people in his tribe; or the people who share his religion; or maybe those who are the same color.

But Jesus tells this story where the neighbour turns out to be not just a stranger, but an enemy; not just a foreigner, but a heretic; not just a man with no name, but a man who treats the stricken Jew like a brother. In other words Jesus seems to be saying that everyone who might cross my path is my neighbour. Everyone I meet is my neighbour; everyone I hear about on the news is my neighbour; It doesn't matter whether they speak a different language; follow a different religion; or, heaven forbid, even voted differently from me in the referendum: they are still my neighbour.

I don't know if you remember the old Peanuts cartoons? There's a lovely one where Charlie Brown has been accused by one of his friends of not loving the human race. Charlie Brown responds angrily saying, "Of course I love the human race. I just can't stand Lucy." But actually I think for most people it's the other way round. We're more likely to love someone if we know their name, but if they're anonymous, we're more likely to be suspicious. They are 'they' as opposed to 'us' and as long as they have no name, we can lump them together and stereotype them and put them in pigeonholes. So it may be significant that in this parable the Samaritan has no name - he is the anonymous foreigner, the sort of figure the tabloids love to hate. And what Jesus seems to be saying is that you can't sort humanity into categories where some people matter more than others: everyone is our neighbour; everyone bears the image of God, and in the face of the stranger and those who are different, there is an opportunity for us to recognise ourselves.

And for Christians, this has clear political implications: you cannot talk about relations between people, about loving our neighbour, without questions of power coming into it. And wherever there's power in a relationship, there are going to be politics. And this is one of the most political of all of Jesus's teachings. He seems to be suggesting that any

politics which tries to drive a wedge between one group of people and another, should be treated, at least by christians, with deep suspicion; any politics which suggests that for, example, people in work should be treated differently from people on benefits; or that christians are somehow more important than muslims; or that white people matter more than black people; or that English people are more important than people from Syria or Turkey or Somalia. Any politics that tries to narrow down the category of neighbour in order to limit our responsibilities, is fundamentally at odds with the teaching of Jesus Christ. And if this makes us uncomfortable, perhaps it ought to, because I think what Jesus seems to be saying here, is that loving our neighbour is actually just as challenging and open ended and limitless and overwhelming as the command to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. So don't think that loving your neighbour is an easier option than loving God. They are both overwhelming and both involve a love without boundaries.

So what must I do to inherit eternal life? The only way I can inherit eternal life, it seems to me, is if I am willing to be open to the eternal: there is no place in christianity for lives that are closed or inward looking or defined by carefully patrolled boundaries. If we are open to eternal life, we shall be overwhelmed by the Eternal God and his summons to love him and everyone who bears his image. It's obvious when you think about it: if we're going to engage with an eternal God then it's no good trying to put up limits and boundaries. As the old hymn puts it, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." But we make his love too narrow, by false limits of our own.

And so maybe the only way to read this parable is to turn it on its head. We tend to identify ourselves with the Good Samaritan, to think we are called to help others out of our own bounteous generosity. But surely, we're not really the Good Samaritan? We're not loving God with all our heart soul strength and mind? We struggle to love our neighbour as ourselves! Surely, the Good Samaritan is a better description of Jesus than of us: we're more like the man attacked by robbers, left helpless victims of our own pride and self-sufficiency, ambushed by our own ignorance and lack of love.

Who is my neighbour? Not just the one I try to help, but the one who helps me and gives his life on the cross to set me free from my fear and anxiety about standing in the

path of eternal life. It may be that no one's asking these questions about eternal life anymore, but I think that's a pity, because Jesus's answer is so exhilarating: "You find eternal life," he's saying, "by allowing eternal life to find you, and blow away your defenses, and open you up to the love of God and the possibility of loving your neighbour." It can turn our attitudes upside down and change the way we see life: not as a scarce resource to be carefully managed and to worry about, but as a well of eternal life bubbling up so it can be given away.

Who am I? What am I doing here? How can I be happy? How can I live well? What must I do to inherit eternal life?

They're all variations on the same question, and Jesus is suggesting here that the answer is to be discovered in dismantling the boundaries, taking down our defenses, setting aside our fears, so that we can discover the eternal grace of God, given to us through Jesus his son; and at the same time discover our neighbour, not to be a threat or a rival, but a brother and sister, sharing the inheritance of that same eternal love that all of us seek, all of us need, and all of us are invited to find and to share in Jesus Christ.

## Reading Texts

Deuteronomy 30: 9-14

9 and the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, 10 when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 11 Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" 14 No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe

Luke 10: 25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii,

gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'" 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."