

The Good Samaritan transforms ...

... by crossing the boundaries we create.

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Trinity, 10th July 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 10:25-37

If you're old enough, you may remember the old Peanuts cartoons featuring Charlie Brown and his friends. And in one of them there's a little scene where Charlie Brown is accused of not loving the human race and indignantly, Charlie Brown replies, "Of course I love the human race. I just can't stand Lucy."

It's very easy, isn't it, for me to stand up here and to say we should all help one another like the Good Samaritan. But the reality is it may be very difficult to love particular people in particular circumstances. The parable of the Good Samaritan is often cited to show the importance of helping people in need and it's often led people into thinking that this is really the key hallmark of a Christian. But I think it's slightly more complicated than that.

The question which triggers this parable is not a question about behaviour or ethics or how we should live a moral life. The question asked at the start of the reading is, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" It's a spiritual question, not a practical one. And it's an interesting question, because an inheritance is usually a gift - you don't have to do anything to receive an inheritance.

So the wording betrays the fact that this lawyer is thinking of eternal life as something that he somehow has to achieve, that it has to be earned. And he's wondering, "What's the minimum I can get away with in order to qualify?" And Jesus's response is not about what you do, but it's about your attitude: to love God with all your being; with all your heart, soul, strength and mind; and to love your neighbour as yourself. That's hugely open-ended: far too much so for the lawyer; far too threatening for him. And so he tries to narrow it down again and he says, "*Well, who is my neighbour, then?*" - thinking that he might be able to limit it just to his own immediate circle. And it's against that background that Jesus tells this story.

I wonder, when you hear the story of the Good Samaritan, who do you identify with? If you think the point of the story is offering a simple moral about helping each other,

you may well find yourself identifying with the Samaritan: the Samaritan seems to be the hero in this story; he doesn't need any help himself; he's wealthy enough to offer material assistance; and he's able to make a difference without being particularly vulnerable. We would all love to be like the Good Samaritan, to help others from a position of strength. It would make all of us feel very good to be able to do that.

But there's another way of reading this story: the Samaritan comes out of nowhere; he has compassion and is moved with pity. Where else do we hear those qualities being talked about in the New Testament: he binds up wounds at his own expense; he shows open-ended and transformative generosity; and then he disappears, but promises to come back and indeed promises to repay whatever is spent to make things good once again.

It seems to me that the Samaritan is rather a Christ-like figure even though he's not just foreign, but a heretic, an enemy and a threat to the Jewish people (or at least that would be the caricature stereotype of Samaritans). The modern day equivalents might be a member of the Taliban or a friend of Vladimir Putin - imagine a parable about the Good Taliban! So this is a parable which hints at Jesus as utterly different from you and me, 'other', someone to be viewed almost as a threat, and of course that is how he is perceived and treated in real life - in which case the man falling into the hands of robbers might be seen as Israel, a nation helpless at the hands of Rome who have come and plundered her, robbed her of her freedom, her wealth and prosperity.

So who do you identify with in this story? Maybe if we're honest with ourselves, we don't identify so much with the godlike Samaritan, helping others in need from a position of strength and abundance. Maybe we feel more like the man left for dead by the robbers. Maybe this morning you feel let down by our elected leaders, peddling delusions and fantasies with scant regard for the truth. Maybe you feel beaten up and left for dead by impersonal forces which leave you helpless: wars; inflation; petrol and fuel bills; the spiralling cost of living; technology that leaves you behind; you feel abandoned at the side of the road and going nowhere. Maybe you feel helpless to change yourself, let alone your circumstances, and you long for new life, for renewal, for a sense of grace and hope - and you're not getting it from the church or from organised religion, from the various priests and levites who pass by on the other side. And you don't know what to do to inherit eternal life.

Well, if any of that describes you, then what you need to be told is not just the platitude that we should help each other - I mean, of course we should do that - that's what every religion and philosophy teaches - even atheists believe that. But what we need to hear is that there is one who comes to you, one who has compassion for you, who offers to bind up your wounds, who carries you and takes care of you and who shows you unconditional generosity, and who promises not to forget you, but to come back to you and to pay whatever is owing. The only catch is that the one who promises to do all of this comes to you in the guise of the 'other', in the form of those whom we find different, unfamiliar, possibly even threatening.

We can only receive the ministry of the good Samaritan if we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable and open, to admit that we can't make it on our own and to open ourselves up to receive from the One who will change and transform us.

So I wonder, can you take that risk of receiving, perhaps from someone who's different from you, because Christ comes to you in that guise? Different because they're not like you: they may be different because of their age or their interests or different politics; they may be different because of their colour, their language or their religion; they may be different because they belong to a different class; or be wealthy or poor or have a different sexuality. It's so easy to huddle together with our like-minded friends, but when we do that the risk is that everyone else becomes alien: at best an unwelcome presence; at worst a threat. And when we habitually see other people as a threat, we shut out the possibility of receiving Jesus himself.

The Good Samaritan doesn't just offer help, he transforms by crossing boundaries, and those boundaries are the ones that you and I put up that separate us from one another and from God.

And so the invitation this morning to us is to have the faith and to take the risk to lower our defences; not to pass by on the other side; to be willing to see Christ in those who are different.

And in our willingness to surrender, may we open our lives and so receive Jesus Christ Himself.

Reading Text

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 neighbour 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 neighbour?' 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 travelling 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 neighbour 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.'