

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time

10.07.2022
By Trevor Williams

Introduction

This passage is about who is my neighbour, and also about who is my enemy. There are many reasons why a person may be considered to be our enemy. We can hate someone because of their politics, history, religion, strangeness or because of a deep seated prejudice. We prefer to have nothing to do with such people. We resent it if they do well because it makes us feel that we have lost out. They are one of 'them' not one of 'us'. Anyone who speaks well of them, is obviously one of "them" also, and is not to be trusted.

In this encounter with the Lawyer, Jesus addresses prejudice and stereotyping, frequent elements that lead to conflict between individuals and groups.

For Jews, Samaritans were enemies, certainly not one of "us". Though of course that was not strictly true. Jews and Samaritans were closely related. As Alice Camille says in a helpful and succinct article (see below "Why didn't the Jews and Samaritans get along") "*They both claimed Abraham as their father, and Moses as their liberator. They both worship the God of Jacob. They are both children of Israel. Initially their differences are political. But they become cultural too, as time apart renders these two kingdoms increasingly estranged.*"

Our Gospel reading in Luke's narrative takes place as Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem. Samaria lies between Galilee and Judah and to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem in Judah most Jews would have taken a long detour to avoid Samaritan territory and the possibility of meeting a Samaritan. Besides, skirmishes between Jews and Samaritans were not uncommon and the direct route through Samaria was considered dangerous.

In the previous Chapter in Luke (9:51-56) Jesus sent messengers to prepare for him to pass through a Samaritan village. But the villagers refused to welcome Jesus because he was travelling on towards Jerusalem the centre of Jewish worship. James and John were furious and wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume the village. Jesus forbid it. But James and John clearly demonstrate the animosity between the two identities.

Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the person who was keeping the law and an example of godly living, through loving his neighbour. A story of shock and awe!

Text

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' 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.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 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. 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." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Comment

What must I do to inherit eternal life (v25)

This is a fundamental question concerning salvation and provides Jesus with an opportunity to expound on the central theme of his teaching and preaching. But Jesus refuses to answer the question directly and addresses the person who is asking the question. The lawyer has been educated in the scriptures so he would know the answer, so why has he chosen to ask this question? If he knows the answer, is his motivation not entirely straightforward? Is he using a question to test Jesus, an attempt to lure Jesus into a reply that would be controversial and damage his public reputation? We don't know. Wisely Jesus replies to a question with a question. We need to be aware that questions can be a form of attack or defense. In such circumstances answering the question factually will not address the hidden agenda. One of my mentors used to suggest that when we suspect that there is more to a question than appears at first sight it can be useful to ask, "what is your interest in asking that question?"

Similarly when Jesus asked the lawyer "what is written in the law" the dynamic of the conversation is clarified. In reply the Lawyer quotes Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18, 'to love God and love neighbour'. Jesus agrees and says living like that, in tune with God's covenantal expectations, will result in life. (10:28). Jesus has moved the conversation from potential conflict to an agreement and a basis for further exploration.

Wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus 'And who is my neighbour?' (v29)

The lawyer wants to be affirmed by Jesus that he is living in obedience to God's law. Again, there is another agenda lurking beneath the surface of the question. And again, Jesus perceives a deeper problem that needs to be addressed.

In a contested society the common understanding of 'neighbour' is frequently "one of us", those who are like us, who are near to us. Obeying the command to love our neighbour as ourselves does not mean that we are free from prejudice or the unjust habit of stereotyping.

Jesus was well aware that in Jewish society of his day, prejudice against Samaritans was commonplace. But notice how in this potentially contentious conversation, Jesus did not accuse the lawyer of such attitudes. Through the telling of the parable he gently leads the lawyer on a journey of self-discovery, to consider that it would be possible for a Samaritan to be fulfilling God's will to love our neighbour in contrast to the Temple officials who failed to do so. Jesus raises the question for this learned lawyer, is it possible that this Samaritan proved to be more godly than your respected religious leaders? When Jesus asked Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell in to the hands of the robbers? The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy". Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise".

The "Good" Samaritan?

The parable is set on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The route would have been familiar to the hearers as it was the route to take if you wished to travel North to Galilee to avoid travelling through Samaria (see above). The parable has three parts like many good sermons and good jokes (the Englishman, the Scotsman and the Irishman!!!). The priest and the Levite see the injured traveller but pass by on the other side. At this point the crowd are expecting the punch line. And predictably, the third person does the decent thing. But he is a Samaritan!

We have dumbed down this parable by calling it the "Good" Samaritan. It is not that he is good, despite being a Samaritan. He is a Samaritan living the way God wishes all people to live.

This parable is more than a moral tale telling us to love one another. It also teaches us that we should not label people and stereotype people. God doesn't have prejudices. God doesn't have stereotypes. God doesn't write people off because of race, colour, ethnicity, or any of the other boxes we like to put people in. God sees the truth about each of us regardless of what people think!

And who is my neighbour?

The person who acts in love towards others, acts as neighbour. To live by the values of eternal life is to love others no matter who they are.

Response

Some questions spring to mind:

1. Conflict transformation requires change in both parties. In this encounter how has Jesus' approach opened up opportunity for change in the Lawyers attitudes. Can we see how we could approach situations of conflict like this?
 2. What item of news, national or local does this parable bring to mind?
 3. What insight does this parable bring to this news item?
 4. Who would we find difficult to accept as an example of godliness?
 5. Can anything be done about prejudice that we are not aware of?
 6. What examples of stereotyping are active in our culture?
 7. Why do we have such difficulty with the broadness of God's mercy
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Prayer

God of mercy

You see each person as they are.

Free us from fear and prejudice

That separate us from one another,

so we may more clearly discern

the growth of your Kingdom

in the most surprising places.

Amen

Further Reading

Alice Camille <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202005/why-didnt-the-jews-and-samaritans-get-along/>

