

James Collins Sermon - Sunday 9th August 2020
The Stories of The Gospel: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

The very famous and much loved story of the Good Samaritan, is described as a story that will live forever. In our culture it has given its name to an organisation which helps people in distress. Luke would have been amazed that centuries and centuries later, from this parable, there would be an organisation called The Samaritans, who have been a great blessing to so many people.

To understand why this parable had such an impact on those who heard it, we need to grasp the context in which it was told. Jesus told the story to a particular person as a result of a particular exchange - Luke v25 to v29. The particular exchange was between Jesus and an expert in the law, about what is necessary for a person to be saved or have eternal life, which is of course the goal of all religion - to achieve salvation, to be on the right side of God, to be welcomed into God's kingdom. What must a person do? What is the heart of Jesus' teaching? What actions result in salvation?

What must I do to inherit eternal life? That is the question to Jesus, but in what is a typical Jewish way of debating, Jesus answers a question with a question - after all, this man is an expert in God's law. Jesus responds, *'What is written in the law?' ... 'How do you read it?' [v26]*. The teacher quotes from the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and all your mind, [Deut. 6:5] and you must love your neighbour as yourself.'* [Lev. 19:18]. Elsewhere in Matthew and Mark's gospel there is an exchange where Jesus is asked, *'What is the most important commandment?'* [Matt. 22:36-37 & Mark 12:30-31] and Jesus himself quotes these scriptures to say that this is the heart of God's demands on human beings, that they love God and love their neighbour. So Jesus on this particular occasion, consistent with what he has said elsewhere, says you've answered correctly, if you can live like that you will be saved.

The following question is the heart of this debate. The man wanted to justify himself and asks Jesus, *'And who is my neighbour?'* [v29]. Why does that question justify him? It seems likely that this man, an expert in the law, a religious professional, knows that when he is examined by these two commands he falls short. He knows that he has not loved God as he should perhaps, but the question is really aimed towards justifying himself under the scrutiny of the second command to love his neighbour as himself. So what he wants is a little bit of further clarification of that command as to how far his love should extend. He wants to know who falls into the category of neighbour and who doesn't? The back story appears to be that this is something that was debated amongst the Jewish people of the time. The answer which was at least sometimes given, was, your neighbour is your fellow Jew. He's asking, is it enough if I just love my fellow Jew? Do I have to love beyond the boundaries of the Jewish people?

It is in response to that question that Jesus tells this parable. It is a simple story, like so many of Jesus' parables, they are profound but they are very simple. Jesus talks about a man on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho who is attacked by robbers and left for dead. I can't help feeling that we are meant to see the story from these various perspectives and we are meant to feel the plight of this individual. If this was us, we would be desperate for help. Good news for him was a couple of religious professionals turned up, like the teacher in the law they devoted their lives to teaching and understanding God's word. Surely they would know that at the heart of the law is that we should love one another. So surely these would be the best possible people to turn up, but the Levite and the priest decided to pass by on the other side. A lot of suggestions have been made as to why, but we don't really need to know why as these two characters represent the failure of loveless religion. They can present themselves as very religious but when faced with a real opportunity to be obedient to God's commands they fail the test. They do not love their neighbour.

And then a Samaritan turns up and you probably know there was tremendous tension between the Samaritans as a race and the Jewish people. They avoided each other whenever they could and they took a very dim view of each other. The Samaritan was a hated figure to the Jew, there was tremendous racial prejudice between the two groups and here we have, as is so often the case in the parables, the sting in the

tail - that it is the Samaritan who behaves in a way that pleases God where the Jewish religious leaders fail. The Samaritan came to where the man was, and when he saw him, he took pity on him. Then Jesus really ladles on the goodness and kindness and mercy of this Samaritan that was so lacking in the priest and the Levite. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds pouring on oil and wine (oil and wine were understood to have medicinal qualities at that time), put him on his own donkey, brought him to an inn. He took care of him personally and provided for him going forward by leaving some money with the innkeeper.

Jesus then turned on the expert in the law, the real life religious professional, and asks which of those three was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers. The expert in the law of course replies, the one who had mercy on him. Jesus' parable forces the expert in the law to reframe his categories about who people are and where the boundaries to love lie. Jesus then concludes by commanding him to go and love like the Samaritan, go and love beyond boundaries.

Reflecting on this exchange, this parable, a few thoughts. First let's reflect on the question of 'who is my neighbour?' It's very natural for human beings to create boundaries around the extent to which they will feel pity, sympathy, love, kindness. There is a parable that charity begins at home and that is true in a sense that it's no good being gracious to lots of other people if you are not gracious in your own home. But sometimes it is quoted in such a way, as to say we should privilege those we identify with over those that we don't. This parable clearly challenges such thinking.

You may know the name Patrick Hutchinson. He is the remarkable man who at a Black Lives Matter protest, when things were getting a bit ugly between some of those who were there campaigning for racial justice and were being confronted with some who were from a white, maybe a neo-fascist type group. Patrick Hutchinson went and rescued somebody who he could be forgiven for thinking of as his enemy. He is a modern day good Samaritan and it's hard to think of a better contemporary example. We do not know if Patrick is a Christian or not, but it was a godly thing to do and he acted in a way that all Christians would aspire to behave, because he was acting like Jesus in that moment, stepping into the situation and rescuing someone who was opposed to him.

Tom Wright, the great New Testament scholar, says this passage is a warning not just for this individual teacher of the law, but for all of Israel and for all of us if we start to think that God privileges one group over another, whether that's because of ethnicity, gender, competence or whatever it might be. If we start to think that one group has a bigger call on God's mercy than another, if we start to frame our identity around something other than Jesus Christ, and we begin to privilege one group over another, there is a warning in this parable that we will destroy ourselves and we will remove ourselves from God's love.

There is a hymn we don't sing nowadays, but there is a lot of truth in it. The first line is 'There is a wideness in God's mercy'. You cannot restrict God's mercy, it is unrestrictable and if you try you will damage yourself in the process. God's love is for all people equally.

Secondly, there is a big challenge in this parable to people who are religious. I don't know whether you would use that term about yourselves. Many Christians would prefer not use the term religious about themselves because of some of the connotations of it, but if you consider yourself a follower of God, there is a trap identified here that you need to avoid. The trap is becoming more concerned with the business of God and trying to work out all the questions you might have, and worse, trying to justify yourself rather than simply accepting that at the heart of God's call upon human beings, is love. The key to acting as a good neighbour are the words 'the Samaritan took pity on the man who had been hurt'. Sadly the Priest and the Levite in the story, who should have known God, had long since forgotten the heart of their own faith. But the Samaritan who had no professional religious credentials, knew exactly what to do when he was faced with the situation, he knew how to please God.

Many religious systems prioritise purity and doctrine and getting every box ticked and getting our understanding nice and square edged, and there is a right place for working out and trying to understand our faith, but never at the cost of the heart of our faith, being that it is a faith that is concerned with the heart.

- Who is my neighbour? Everyone.
- What am I called to do? Love them.

Final question, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said you need to love God with everything you've got and you need to love your neighbour as yourself. Even the teacher in religious law knew that he had problems. As you look at this you might think, do I measure up to this Samaritan, do I measure up to what Jesus is asking me, or I can't follow this law of love - it's not in me, I might be able to occasionally, but I can't do it consistently. So what hope is there for me to be saved, what hope is there for me to be on the right side of God?

At this point I would invite you to reflect on the death of Jesus. The heart of the Christian faith is the cross where Jesus died to make up for all our shortcomings, to take the penalty for every mean, loveless and pitiless thing that we have done. All the hard, unkind words we have said; the attitude of our heart where we have excluded others from our own love; the times we have found ways to push other people down so that we would be elevated; the times that we have cut corners morally to protect our own position; the ways in which we have spoken untruths to our own advantage; all these ways in which we act lovelessly - how then can we be saved? This law of love exposes us.

Jesus has died so that God could sweep all that away.

You see at the heart of Christianity there is a law of love, but there is also a gift of grace, that God says to people like me - who can't measure up to the law of love - for the sake of my son Jesus who has died, I forgive you and I give you a new chance and I will strengthen you to begin, step by step, to walk this path of love. And be assured that because of my grace, even if you cannot live the law of love perfectly, you will be welcomed into my presence, you will be saved. And when you die and you stand before me, or once Jesus returns and I stand before God then, I will be forgiven of all my shortcomings and graciously admitted to the Kingdom of eternal life. This parable is not just instruction for us to follow, it highlights the fact that we are not the people we should be and it drives us to the cross where, if we will kneel before the Lord who died for us, we will be saved. God bless you.