

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

The story of The Good Samaritan is as well known in secular society as it is in the church. You have probably heard many sermons preached on the story. Often those sermons focus on ways of identifying people who may fit into the category of ‘neighbour’ and then go on to encourage hearers to help these neighbours. This is all to the good and is not to be disparaged in any way. But I want to come at the story from a couple of different perspectives. Before I do that, however, I need to briefly give you the historical context of the parable.

In biblical times nestled between Judea in the south of Palestine and Galilee in the north there lay Samaria. For two centuries Samaria was the capital of Israel. When the Assyrians in 597BCE conquered what we know as Palestine they took thousands of Samaritan Jews as captives to Babylon. At the same time some Assyrians, probably members of the Assyrian forces, settled in Samaria. Over the generations these people assimilated to the extent that they adopted some form of Judaism and came to regard themselves as Jews. When descendants of the exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem by Darius, the Persian conqueror of the Babylonian Empire, they refused to recognise the Samaritans as Jews. The returned Jews built a temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans were excluded from worshipping in this temple. In response they built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The two groups hated each other so much so that Jewish rabbis, for example, said that to marry a Samaritan woman was to lie with a beast! The Jews regarded Samaritans as unclean and would have nothing to do with them. This, then, is the context in which the parable would have originally been heard.

I said that I wanted to look at the parable from two perspectives. The first involves looking at the questions asked by the lawyer and by Jesus. The lawyer asks, “who is my neighbour”? The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, claims that this is not an easy question to answer in abstract terms. This is the case, he says, because we are defined by our roles in society. To Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten, for example, I am a potential vote in an election. To a shoe salesman I am a possible dollar in the till. Moreover in modern societies that have a

complex machinery of social welfare it is easy to classify people in ways designed to determine the kind of services they may receive. In this sense they are cogs in a bureaucracy that operates by categorising people as belonging to box 'a', 'b', or 'c'. Because there is no principle that we can apply to identify a neighbour, Ricoeur maintains we need to understand that "one does not *have* a neighbour. (Instead) I make myself someone's neighbour." Ricoeur's observation reflects Jesus' comment after the telling of the parable. Jesus does not answer the lawyer's question by saying that the man set upon by thieves is the neighbour. Rather he asks the lawyer, "who proved to be a neighbour to the man?"

But this still all rather vague. To sharpen things up we can ask: what does it mean to be a neighbour to someone? Ricoeur says that to be a neighbour to someone is to cultivate hope in that person. Being a neighbour, he claims, involves showing another person that she can expect *good* from me. This, of course, raises another question: what is the content of the hope that a neighbour can cultivate in another person. For a Christian the answer is that the hope has been embodied by Jesus Christ. In order to cultivate this hope the neighbour binds the wounds of others. Viewed from this perspective, then, the parable teaches not so much about who is our neighbour but instructs us, instead, to ask to whom I have made myself a neighbour, and to whom will I make myself a neighbour.

My second perspective on the parable of the Good Samaritan comes from the early church. The church fathers saw the actors in the parable as symbols standing for others. So they understood the man who fell among thieves to be a figure standing for humanity as a whole. In this reading humanity is, if you like, a race that is beaten up: the weak are exploited by the powerful. It is also a race that is beaten up by itself - by envy and the love of power that constantly morphs into armed conflict and the violent oppression of other people. Humanity then, the early church believed, is a race that could not help itself out of the morass in which it found itself.

The Good Samaritan in this allegorical reading is Jesus Christ. But this raises a question as to how this could be. As we saw earlier the Samaritans were treated as outcasts by the Jews. Is Jesus treated as an outcast? The answer, according to the New Testament, is yes he is. As

St Paul said in his letter to the church in Corinth, the God whose power is to love without limit, to love to the extent of pouring himself out in crucifixion, is offensive to a humanity that valorises self assertion and will to power as the good. For this reason Christ was an outcast. As Samaritans were outcasts to the Jews, so Christ is an outcast to men and women.

In this allegorical reading the inn in the parable is treated as a figure for the church. This is the community that exists to embody the way of God in the world as it is embodied in Jesus Christ. The church is the place where the wounded and broken are received and are nursed by a community that only exists because of the gift of new life in Christ.

In these readings of the parable of the Good Samaritan from different eras, Christ is seen as the one who makes himself a neighbour to humanity. The church, therefore, is a community that is to make itself a neighbour to others. In a way, then, Ricoeur's reading of the parable and that of the early church fathers dovetail together in leading us ask ourselves: to whom have we, and to whom will we, make ourselves a neighbour?

Ross Carter
July 2016

