

## Reflection for Trinity 5 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

But wanting to justify himself, the teacher of the law asked Jesus, *“And who is my neighbour?”*

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, set against the striking images of narrow winding roads cutting their way through the rocky desert from Jerusalem to Jericho, along with the events that unfold, are ones which I am sure many of us have engraved on our minds from childhood. But when we recall, recount, or reflect on the story what is the focus of that retelling? For most of us, I suspect, it is the characters in the parable and the issue of who is our neighbour, and not so much on the original setting, around which Jesus tells it. Look at the setting and the radical nature of what Jesus is saying starts to come to the surface.

Yes, the story provides us with a vivid illustration of how to fulfil the second great commandment – love your neighbour as yourself: the Samaritan being the one who sees the need of another and using his own resources, meets that need without prejudice and, regardless of circumstances and potential cost to himself.

The contextual question, though, is why that the teacher of the law asks a far deeper question than how to simply be a good neighbour. *“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*, to which Jesus replies with the two great commandments we heard before we made our confession this morning: love God first and then love your neighbour.

With the mind of someone in the legal profession concerned with detail, the teacher is not satisfied and wants to push the definition further - OK, define what you mean by neighbour. The person who lives next door? my friends? where do I draw the line? That way I will know if I will or will not get eternal life.

Jesus senses that limits are being placed round who is my neighbour. He senses too that what is being asked is an understanding of how one can be justified through works; how, through one's own actions, eternal life can be achieved or earned. What Jesus wants is to radically blow away those ideas, showing how the way he defines *“neighbour”* means that every one of us will fail to live up to the command in our daily lives, however hard we try, however much energy we expend.

In simple terms he is saying that eternal life comes through the grace and love of God - not through the efforts we make.

The way we care and love those around us, be they those folk we are naturally drawn towards or those maybe we struggle with for one reason or another is simply our response to the love and grace which we have already received from God. Look at the parable.

A Jewish traveller is making the dangerous journey along a road known for its attacks by groups of robbers or bandits. He is attacked and left by the roadside for dead.

The focus then turns to those who pass by, will each of any of them help and aid?

The first is a priest – his role is to serve in the temple at Jerusalem, with his highest and most important duty being to offer sacrifices for the people. Surely this is the sort of person who would stop and help a fellow Jew at death door? But did he? No

He is more concerned with remaining ritually clean. If the man is dead and he touches the body, under Jewish customs he becomes unclean and would have to go through the process of purification again before he can serve in the temple. For the priest, serving in the temple is more important than coming to the aid of this wounded man.

The second person to come along is a Levite, whose role was to maintain and help with the services in the temple, a combination of a server and verger is maybe the easiest way for us to think of it. Surely, he will stop and help a fellow Jew? But again, the answer is no; he passes by.

Why did neither of these characters help? Jesus does not tell us, we can only surmise, and are left reflecting why did they not help.

Then along comes a Samaritan - someone from a community that was moved into the land of Israel by the Assyrian kings, who had a policy of moving groups of people around their empire upon conquest to help with subjugation, the Samaritans being moved in when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was sent into exile. Over the years, although the Samaritans had come to worship God, albeit in their own distinctive way, the Jews had never accepted them and there was a great deal of friction and hatred between Jew and Samaritan. One could describe it as a sectarian divide – the sort of barriers that can be seen today in various parts of the world between communities that can from time-to-time overflow into violence.

In one of the gospels, there is an incident involving Jesus making his way to Jerusalem through Samaria. He asks for overnight hospitality from the Samaritans community but, because he is travelling to Jerusalem, the response is very much – No!

Ask the question, should this Samaritan help this Jew? and I suspect both sides of this ethnic divide would have replied with a definite answer - No. But human compassion and pity for the man is greater than the ethnic barriers that exist and breaks down the wall that existed between them. Not only does he stop and help he also covers the cost from his own pocket.

What Jesus has done by telling this story is turn the teacher of the law's question around, rather than asking "who is my neighbour?", the question should be "what is love?" In the story love is something that transcends the artificial barriers of ethnic divides and illustrates the sort of love and grace we see from and from God.

Think of the way humanity, as result of sin so often turns its back on God walking away with purpose, doing its own thing. For God, who hates sin and loves righteousness, that is enough to create an insurmountable barrier. Yet what we see so vividly on the cross is that barrier being broken down through love.

The answer to teacher of the law's question "who is my neighbour?" is "everybody"; but the real question found in that story is "what is love?" and "what does love cost?" For the Samaritan, it meant ignoring the social barriers of his day, it meant danger, it meant giving in a very practical way - wine, bandages clothes, money, to name but a few.

As we come this morning to celebrate the Eucharist, as we are reminded in the Eucharistic prayer of God's love and grace for us, let us pray that we will reflect that love to others, in the same way Christ loves us.

*"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.'"*