

## LUKE 10.25-37: THE CHALLENGE TO 'DO'

Chelmsford 2 February 2014

### 1. SAMARITANS BE DAMNED!

'*Samaritans be damned!*' summed up the attitude of most Jews to Samaritans.

The Samaritans were regarded as half-breeds, traitors to the Jewish race.

The roots of this bitterness went back to the return of Jews from exile in 539 BC.

Almost a century earlier (720 BC) Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom of Samaria, and transported much of the population back to Media, and in their place had put people of other races. Those who were carried away never came back; they simply assimilated into the country to which they had been taken – while those Jews who remained in Samaria intermarried.

All of this was very different from what happened to the Jews living in the southern kingdom. They too were defeated in 597 BC and many of them were carried off to Babylon.

But unlike their Northern counterparts, they didn't lose their identity – instead they retained their racial purity by refusing to marry non-Jews.

When these southerners returned, they would have nothing to do with the Samaritans left in the northern kingdom. The Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Jerusalem temple – but the southerners refused.

They would have nothing to do with these northern compromisers.

So a bitter quarrel was born.

Eventually the Samaritans built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim and gradually developed a ritual, if not a religion, of their own.

In the meantime, neither side lost a chance to do one another in.

Five centuries later when Jesus came on the scene, this state of hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews was as real as ever. When John in his Gospel wrote, "**Jews will have nothing to do with Samaritans**" (4.49) he was making an under-statement.

The Jews had as much in common with the Samaritans as a right wing Jew has with a Palestinian terrorist.

It is ironic that we talk of the 'Parable of the *Good Samaritan*'. As far as Jews of Jesus' day were concerned, the only good Samaritan was a dead one!

This then is the background to the parable.

### 2. A LEADING QUESTION

But we're going too fast. Let's set the parable in its context.

A teacher of the Law set out to trick Jesus: "**Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**" (10.25). Anticipating Jesus' answer that he should love God and love his neighbour, he immediately came up with a supplementary question.

In this respect his approach can be likened to that followed in the House of Commons, where it is not the first question to the Prime Minister which counts, but the second. Yes, it was the second question which was designed to catch Jesus out: "**Who is my neighbour?**" (v29).

Probably the teacher of the law expected Jesus to launch into a technical discussion about the term ‘**neighbour**’.

By and large the Jews of that time regarded the term ‘neighbour’ as a term of ‘limited liability’. It certainly didn’t include those ‘dogs’, the Gentiles; nor did it include those ‘half-breeds’, the Samaritans. Indeed, as far as many Pharisees were concerned, it didn’t include the ordinary ‘people of the land’.

For many religious people the term ‘neighbour’ was restricted to those ‘orthodox in faith and practice’. They believed that it wasn’t right to show love to all and sundry.

Indeed, the rabbis used to say that heretics and informers “*should be pushed into the ditch and not be pulled out*”.

There were limits as to how far ‘neighbourliness’ could be extended.

I.e. the question “**Who is my neighbour?**” in reality was ‘*How far does my responsibility extend? Where are the limits of my duty of loving to be drawn?*’

### **3. A PARABLE WITH A PUNCH**

Jesus answered with a parable.

It was PG Woodhouse who once said: “*A parable is a Bible story which at first sounds like a pleasant yarn, but keeps something up its sleeve which suddenly pops up and leave you flat*”. I believe that on this occasion Jesus floored this teacher of the law.

Jesus began: “**There was once a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when robbers attacked him, stripped him and beat him up, leaving him half-dead**”(v30). This particular 17-mile stretch of road was dangerous beyond.

With its sudden turnings and rocky defiles, it was a happy-hunting ground for robbers. Not for nothing it was known as the ‘Path of Blood’. Anybody travelling that road was a fool, just asking for trouble. It was not at all surprising that he got mugged.

“**It so happened that a priest was going down that road; but when he saw the man, he walked on by, on the other side. In the same way a Levite also came along, went over and looked at the man, and then walked on by, on the other side**” (vv31.32).

At first sight the behaviour of the priest and the Levite, both God-fearing men, sounds an incredible. Why didn’t these religious characters lift a finger?

There are a variety of possibilities:

- Maybe they were callous, hard-hearted men
- Alternatively they could have been cowards, who thought that robbers might re-appear any moment. Maybe they were afraid that the guy who had been beaten up was being used as a ‘booby-trap’.
- Or was their behaviour determined by their religious scruples? Perhaps they thought the unconscious man was dead.

According to Num 13 no Jew could take part in a religious rite if he had touched a corpse. So both the priest & the Levite refused to get involved, because it would mess up their service for God.

Probably at this point Jesus’ audience was expecting an anti-clerical dig: “*Now along came Benjamin, an ordinary Jew*”. But surprise, surprise: “**A Samaritan... came upon the man, and when he saw him, his heart was filled with pity**” (v33).

This must have knocked Jesus’ audience flat.

If he had walked by on the other side, it would have been understandable.

Indeed, it would have been understandable if the Samaritan had crossed over and booted the Jew a final ‘coup de grace’. But no: **“his heart was filled with pity”**.

To be precise:

- **“He poured oil and wine on his wounds”**: the oil would have acted as a mollifying agent, soothing the pain; while the wine with its alcohol content would have acted as a disinfectant, cleansing the wound.
- **“He bandaged”** his wounds. Almost certainly he didn’t have a First Aid kit to hand. Rather we are to imagine him tearing up his own head cloth and using that as a bandage. That would have cost him something
- **“Then he put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins (20 £50 notes?) and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Take care of him’, he told the innkeeper, ‘and when I come back this way, I will pay you whatever else you spend on him’”** (vv34,35). This Samaritan was not content to do the minimum – he went the second mile. I’m told that the cost of a day’s board was normally one-twelfth of these silver coins: i.e. he gave the innkeeper enough money for three weeks board. He was incredibly generous.

Jesus then drives his point home: **“In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbour towards the man attacked by robbers?”** (v36)

Do notice how Jesus subtly turns the tables: while the teacher’s question concerned the object of love (*‘Whom must I treat as a neighbour?’*), Jesus asks about the subject of love (*‘Who acted as a neighbour?’*). I wonder, was Jesus saying: *‘Think of the sufferer, put yourself in his place, and then consider who needs help’*.

The teacher of the Law answered somewhat grudgingly: **“The one who was kind to him”** (v37a). Poor fellow, he wasn’t able to say *‘the Samaritan’* – that would have been too much! Jesus replied: **“You go, then, and do the same”** (v37b)

#### 4. JESUS CHALLENGES YOU AND ME TODAY

At this point I feel like sitting down. Jesus has said it all. The parable is so patently clear. And yet, perhaps I need to spell out its three-fold lesson

##### (1) *There are no limits to neighbourliness*

**“Who is my neighbour?”** Your neighbour and mine is anyone in need.

In the words of John Havlik, a popular American writer: Your neighbour is *“anyone who hurts that you touch in the regular traffic pattern of your life”*.

In this connection the words of John Donne are still relevant: *“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well is if a promontory were, as well as if many of thy friends or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee”*.

There are no limits to neighbourliness.

Neighbourliness may begin with the people next door, but it doesn’t end there.

To be fair, as a church we don't do badly. For instance, through our Monday Club and Victoria Club we care for those who suffer with mental health problems; through our Child Contact Centre we care for broken families; through our Oasis Café we often care for people on their own; through Street Pastors we care for young people in trouble; through the Sunshine Club on Monday mornings we care for older lonely people.

But we can never rest on our laurels. There are always neighbours in need.

## **(2) *Action, not concern, is required.***

Jesus calls us to be people of, action. **“Go and do the same”** says Jesus

Let me emphasise the little word **“do”**

To quote John Havlik again: *“Love is not a profession, it is a demonstration... It is not just ‘caring about’, it is ‘caring for’”*.

In terms of our care for one another, we need more doers

- We desperately need more people to serve on our pastoral team. Currently we have nobody overseeing the Springfield area or indeed the South East Chelmsford area. Is there nobody with a heart and with some time for pastoral care?

In terms of our care for the wider world, we need more ‘doers’ mid-week.

- Monday Club needs one or two people prepared to give a Monday afternoon to chat and listen to people in need of friendship
- Charis, which organises a lunch for older people once a month on a Tuesday, needs cooks and helpers willing to help every other month
- Victoria Club, which provides a lunch every Wednesday for people wrestling with mental health issues, needs cooks & helpers, willing to go on a monthly rota
- Oasis Café needs more doers, particularly on a Friday, 10 until 12

## **(3) *Action, not just faith, is required of all of us***

The temptation is for some of us to switch off. The reality is that a lot of us lead incredibly busy lives. We are busy at home, busy at work, busy with all kinds of commitments.

We certainly haven't got time to come down to the church mid-week.

But do note, that a good number of the opportunities for service relate to Saturday and Sunday.

- If our church is going to be engaged in mission, then the premises need to be cleaned. Maybe you can't volunteer to be part of a regular cleaning team, but what about giving three Saturday mornings a year to spring-cleaning the church. Is that too much?
- If our church is to be a place where people feel loved and affirmed, then we need people to welcome them outside the church. OK it means getting to church 40 minutes early – but not every week.
- Or what about being on the coffee rota? OK it may mean staying on 40 minutes after church, but again not every week. Just once a month is all we are asking.

**“Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?”**

Jesus in his reply did not talk about having faith – he did not elaborate on loving God.

Rather he talked about putting faith into action - about loving others – on rolling up one's sleeves for others.

Action, not just faith, is what is required of all of us.

Jesus wants you and me to be doers!

Here is a message for us all to hear on this day when we are focussing on 'opportunities for service in 2014'.