

BACKGROUND & SERMON 3 July 2016

(Reading Luke 10:25-37)

Jewish teachers usually used “neighbour” to mean “fellow Israelite.” Now the expert in the law is testing Jesus on who He thinks the neighbour is. Without answering him directly, Jesus tells a story.

In the time of Christ, Western Palestine was divided into three provinces, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Samaria occupied the centre of Palestine. Israel fell in 722BC after a long siege by the Assyrian army. Most of the population of Israel were captured and sent into exile. Their descendants came back, settled in Samaria and married into all the Gentile nations.

The Jews considered these Samaritans as “half Jews” who were untrue to God and their traditions. The Samaritans also had their own temple in Mt Gerizim and only considered the first 5 books of Moses as their Bible.

This animosity continued in Jesus’ day. Both groups excluded the other from their respective cultic centres, the Jerusalem temple, and the Samaritan temple on Mt Gerizim. The Samaritans, for example, were forbidden access to the inner courts of the temple in Jerusalem, and any offering they might give was considered as if it were from a Gentile. It appears Samaritans were, in practice, treated as Gentiles. All marriage between the groups was, therefore, forbidden, and social relations were greatly restricted. With such prescribed separation, it is not surprising that any interaction between the two groups was strained.

The mere term Samaritan was one of contempt on the lips of Jews and, among some scribes, it possibly would not even be uttered. Although there is less evidence for similar attitudes from the Samaritan side, we can assume they existed.

The common Jewish perspective on Samaritans as being nearly Gentile was evidently held, to some extent, by Jesus as well. Jesus refers to the Samaritan leper as “this foreigner” in Luke 17:18 and prohibits his disciples, during their commissioning, from taking the message of the kingdom to either the Samaritans or the Gentiles in Matthew 10:5. Yet the overwhelming evidence in the Gospels is that Jesus’ attitude toward the Samaritans differed radically from that of his Jewish contemporaries.

Jesus “rebuked” (Lk 9:55) his disciples when they displayed the usual Jewish animosity, in asking to have the “fire of judgment” rain down upon the inhospitable Samaritans. Moreover, he did not refuse to heal the Samaritan leper but honoured him as the only one of the ten who remembered to give glory to God. So, also, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus clearly breaks through the traditional prejudices in portraying the despised Samaritan, not the respected Jewish priest or Levite, as the true neighbour to the man in need. Here as elsewhere, Jesus, in confronting his audience with God’s demands, breaks through traditional definitions of “righteous” and “outcast.”

But why did the priest or the Levite not help the poor victim?

Well they were prohibited by Jewish cleansing laws to touch a corpse. If they did they were unclean and unable to enter the temple. The priest would have been unable to perform any duties at the temple. However, both of them were actually travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, meaning that they were not going to have to enter the temple in the immediate future. And they did not know for certain if the victim was indeed dead. They had no excuse for not helping the victim!

The Samaritan on the other hand had all the excuses of the world not to help the victim, but he went out of his way to help him, not only helping him with his immediate needs, but also financially with his recovery process. Oil was used medicinally and for washing wounds; wine was also apparently used to disinfect wounds.

Then Jesus asks the expert of the law: Who is the neighbour in this story? But he did not get Jesus’ message: He still refuses to utter the word: The Samaritan! He says in an impersonal way: the one who had mercy for the victim!

Amen

SERMON

The text verses for the sermon are:

²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” ³⁰In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem

to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

After the shock of Brexit, I read in the newspapers that racial tensions in England were mounting and that there were many incidents of violence aimed at minority groups.

A good friend of mine, Professor Glenna Jackson, whom we visited last year, worked on the parables of Jesus and asked different people what the parables meant to them and if they can relate any of their stories to that of the Samaritan.

A refugee from Burundi Jean Ntahoturi introduced his analysis of the parable with another story:

“He said that, in 1995, while he was shopping in a suburb he heard gun fire nearby. Two soldiers were shot dead. The rebels were around. In a confused situation, he decided to get away and run to the hills. He was not alone. As they were climbing the hill, a mother realised her 5 years old son was not with her. She wanted to go back and fetch him. They did their best to persuade her not to go, but she insisted. As she was searching for him, the child saw his mother from afar. He was in the hands of the rebels. When he started crying the rebels saw his mother and called her to come and take the child. At first she was afraid, but she got courage and she approached them and took her child”

According to him one should, instead, identify with the victim rather than the Good Samaritan because help comes from the most unexpected source, in this case, a rebel soldier from the enemy tribe!

I found this insight quite refreshing after hearing this parable being preached to me as I grew up in the apartheid years of South Africa, either as focussing on the Samaritan who did not concede to racial discrimination, or the big debate who is **not** the neighbour!

I agree that sometimes we would miss the fact that there was a victim lying on the ground, nearly beaten to death, with no one to help him. Then, twice, help does arrive but they do not help him at all. Imagine the anguish he must have felt and the disappointment when they just walked on! But I also think that there is still the other side to the story as well, namely, that of a despised Samaritan who went out of his way to help the poor victim. I

do not think the innocent victim cared that his helper was a Samaritan.

But help does come sometimes in the strangest ways and means especially when you are a follower of God. Have you been helped in an unexpected way before? Have you been a Good Samaritan to someone before?

If you are the *Good Samaritan* who always helps, remember a few things:

The left hand must not know what the right hand is doing;

You are not a hero but a helper;

Be sensitive to the needs of the one you are helping;

Try to teach them the skills to walk on their own, without becoming crutches to them!

Do not overstay your welcome...

Have you been a victim of some kind?

In our society today, it is much more difficult to see the victims, since many refuse to talk about the scars. Daily, we would walk past people who have been through the most terrible experiences without knowing about it. Sometimes I, as Minister, would even walk past a victim without knowing of their long-time suffering as a victim.

Yes, you can be a victim sitting in this Church this morning, without anyone knowing about it. Maybe you need a Good Samaritan to help you out of your misery, struggle.

Your children can be victims of your anger and guilt and you can hide it. If it is true, do not hide it any longer. Give it air to breathe. Let it become open and known so that you and your children can work together for a better solution.

If you are a victim of a very unhappy marriage or relationship, do not keep it for yourself any longer. Deal with it by either getting help or joining a support group.

If you are the victim of any form of abuse, get help as soon as possible.

There are loads of organisations run by professional and able people to help you!

If you are sitting here and do not want to tell anyone, remember that I am called, by God, to be your Samaritan. Please do not hesitate to come and

Speak to me. You do not have to pretend. You do not have to tell me anything you do not want to talk about. You do not have to put a mask on. If you feel too exposed to come forward, just slip a wee paper with a nameless prayer request in the offering plate.

May we all go from this place, whether you are a “victim” or trying to be a good Samaritan, with only one goal and that is to become what Jesus Christ intended for us to be: loving neighbours to each other, showing mercy, loyalty and faithfulness to one another as God showered us with his mercy, forgiveness, and love!

May we go from here knowing there is a great example of a GOOD Samaritan, namely, Jesus Christ who came and took away all our sins. Yes, that he even left his Holy Spirit to help us as we fall victim or become Samaritans to one another!

May we praise God, because help indeed comes from places and people least expected...

Amen