

Brancepeth Sermon
Fourth Sunday after Trinity; 10 July 2022

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Deut 30:9-14; Lk 10:25-37; Ps 25:1-10

*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always.
Amen*

I must admit that my heart sank a little,
when I realised which passage I had been given to preach on today:
The parable of the *Good Samaritan*.
It's not that there's anything *wrong* with it.
It's not a passage that makes me uncomfortable.
It's not one that I find bewildering.
It's not one that requires me to talk about controversial topics.
No.

The problem is: it is *just too familiar*.

How many hundreds of times have most of us heard this story,
and heard it spoken about?

I remember in school, in an RE lesson,
being asked to write an updated version and -
this would probably be in the early 80s -
writing about 'The Good Punk Rocker'.

Surprise, surprise, it was the man with the spiky hair
and the safety-pin piercings who turned out to be the neighbour!
You have probably heard dozens of variations like that yourself
all of them rather predictable.

So the problem is: this is a text
coated in such a thick layer of familiarity -
like a thick layer of varnish -
that I'm not sure how to chip through that
and see the colours fresh again.

I have therefore done what I often do when I'm trying to
find a way in to a passage on which I have to preach.

I listen out for *anything* that strikes me as odd,
anything that doesn't *quite* fit,
anything that trips me up.

And there is *one* such thing in this passage,
though it is so small that
you may think I'm making a fuss over nothing at all
when I try to explain it.

What I want you to do is look carefully at this passage,
and how the parable is set up to answer a specific question.

Jesus is in conversation with the lawyer.

The lawyer has rightly identified that
the law can be summed up in two great commandments:
'You shall love the Lord your God ...
and *your neighbour as yourself.*'

And Jesus has confirmed that this is right.

But the lawyer wants to clarify the second of these commandments,

You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

He wants to be clear about who, *exactly*, he should love.

And given the way Luke phrases it,
telling us that the lawyer is ‘trying to justify himself’,
it seems that the lawyer might also want to be clear about
who he *doesn't* have to love - who is *not* his neighbour.

If his salvation depends upon his obedience to these two commands,
he wants to be very clear about
the *limits* of the demands they make on him.

Yes, I have to love my neighbour -
but who, *exactly* is my neighbour?

That's the question that the parable is designed to answer.

And we all know how it goes.

The lawyer might have been hoping that
the commandment to love his neighbour
was really a commandment to love *people like him*,
members of his community,
people he could respect,
people whose value was obvious,
people who were in some sense deserving.

And Jesus' parable tells him that, no,
loving your neighbour means loving people who are *not* like you,
who are *not* members of your community,
who *don't* match your definitions of respectability,
who do *not* look deserving by your standards.

It means loving people regardless of their
identity, circumstance, and behaviour.

The circle of those you are called to love
stretches far beyond all the boundaries we throw up
between 'us' and 'them'.

So far, this is all very familiar. So what is it that trips me up?

It is this. The lawyer has asked 'Who is my neighbour?'

In context, he is asking 'Who does God call me to love?'

And Jesus tells him this story, and finishes with the same question:

'Who is the neighbour?' - or, more fully

'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour
to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?'

And the answer given by the lawyer is

‘The one who showed him mercy.’

So it sounds like the answer to the question,

‘Who is my neighbour?’ is ‘The one who shows me mercy’.

In other words, it sounds like the answer to the question,

‘Who am I called to love?’ is

‘Only those who show *me* mercy’.

That can’t be right, can it?

I’d expect it to be the other way around.

I’d expect Jesus to get to the end of the story,

and ask the lawyer,

‘Which of these three *recognised the robbed man as his neighbour?*’

That way, when the lawyer answered

‘The one who showed him mercy’

the message would be clear.

The answer to ‘Who is my neighbour?’ would be

‘the person *to whom* you can show mercy –

the person who is in need, whoever they are,
even if they are one of “them” rather than one of “us”.’

That’s what I expect:

Who is my neighbour? The one who *is in need*.

Who is my neighbour? The one who has suffered injustice.

Who is my neighbour? The one who *to whom* I can show
mercy.

But that’s not quite what it says.

Instead the answer Jesus gives to the question

‘Who is my neighbour?’ is ‘The one who *shows me* mercy.’

Does that mean I only need to love those who love me?

Do I only need to show mercy to those who show mercy to me?

That’s clearly not what Jesus means. After all,

he carries straight on to say, ‘Go and do likewise’ -

and that seems pretty firmly to be

an instruction to *behave like the Samaritan:*

to show mercy, to cross boundaries,

to love our enemies as well as our friends.

The ultimate message to the lawyer does indeed seem to be:
behave like the Samaritan.

That's clear enough.

The normal lesson we draw from the parable
is obviously the right one.

So I'm probably making something out of nothing.

But I still can't quite get past the itch -

the fact that the question and answer

at the end of the parable *don't quite fit*.

And so I want us to dwell for a short while

with this little wrinkle in the text,

and ask whether it has anything to teach us.

And here's my suggestion.

Jesus' answer to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?'

is 'Anyone who shows *you* mercy

regardless of *your* identity, circumstance, and behaviour

and so shows *you* how to treat *others* as neighbours

regardless of *their* identity, circumstance, and behaviour.'

In other words,

*for the lawyer to learn to behave like the Samaritan,
he needs first to recognise himself
in the man who was robbed.*

For him to become someone capable of
showing mercy to others, regardless of their identity -
he needs *first* to recognise himself as
someone who has *received* mercy, regardless of *his* identity.

For him to become someone capable of seeing others
simply in their human need,
and responding to them as neighbours,
he needs first to recognise that
he has been seen simply in *his* human need,
and he has already been *treated* as a neighbour.

Or, to put it another way:

Don't rush too quickly to identify with the Samaritan.

Don't rush too quickly to identify as the hero of this story -
someone with the calling and the ability to do good to others.

You *are* called to do good,
you *are* called to behave like this Samaritan -
but if all that you hear in this story is
an example of the good you should do,
and a command that you do this good,
you'll be missing something crucial.

Before you are called to show mercy,
you are a *recipient* of mercy.

Before you are called to take care of others,
you are a *recipient* of care.

Before you are called to treat others as your neighbours,
you have been *treated* as a neighbour.

If you are in a position to give,
it is because (and only because) you have received.

If you are in a position bind up others' wounds,
it is because (and only because) your wounds have first been bound.

If you are in a position to forgive,
it is because (and only because) you have been forgiven.

If you are in a position to love,
it is because (and only because) you have first been loved.

We know that to be true in one central way,
in that *our* love for God and neighbour
is called forth in response to *God's* love for us.

God loved us before we ever loved.

God was merciful to us before we were ever merciful.

God cared for us before we ever cared.

As it says elsewhere in the New Testament,

Whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us -

so Christ is our Good Samaritan;

he is the one who picks us up, pours oil and wine on us,

and pays for our care.

But it is true in lots of other ways as well,

ways that echo that central truth.

We learn to love mostly by being loved by others.

We learn to love by receiving love from those around us.

In small ways and big -

whether through family, or friends, or strangers,

whether directly or indirectly.

We learn to treat others as neighbours
by being treated as neighbours ourselves.

So that's what I hear

when I concentrate on this strange wrinkle in the passage.

Our love is never an achievement.

It is never something we conjure up for ourselves.

It is never something for which we can take credit.

Because it is always something we have first received.

Our love for neighbour, and our love for God,

are always a response,

growing out of the ways we have first been loved.

So when you next read the parable of the good Samaritan,

try this:

As well as putting yourself in the position of the Samaritan,

and asking what you can *do*,

and *to whom* you should do it,

put yourself also in the position of the robbed man.

Ask what you have *received*,
who has bound up *your* wounds,
whose generosity has given you whatever position,
whatever stability, whatever resources,
whatever desire to help, whatever love for others,
you know today.

Recognise all that you have received,
as you learn yourself to give,

Dear Father,
We love because you first loved us.
Deepen *our* love by deepening
our recognition of *your* love for us,
and send us out into the world
to echo your love in our own.

Amen.