

St Brandon's, Sermon for 13th July 2025.

Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Psalm 25:1-10, Luke 10:25-37

"Pride and the Samaritan"

Alison Hobbs

This is one of those stories about Jesus that make me cheer and squirm in equal measure. All three readings are full of assurances that are both comforting and uncomfortable; reassuringly simple and disconcertingly challenging.

The gospel makes me want to cheer, because Jesus, our hero, once more defies the baddies, slips the noose and beats them at their own game.

The lawyer, we are told, is asking the question in order to trap Jesus. The lawyer represents the cynical unbelievers and doubters: who is Jesus to be claiming these authorities that rest with the temple, and God? Who is this radical teacher who is overturning their traditional teaching and consorting with outcasts? Who seems to have no respect for status, his own or others, who has no social sensitivity about class, tribe and general worth. Who sees no difference between those who have gained wealth and knowledge, and those who are grindingly poor and worthless – indeed the poorest seem to be magnets for his attentions, which is an affront to all who know what's proper and seemly, the acknowledged way to get on and influence people.

The learned lawyer stands up and challenges Jesus to tell him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, turns the question back to him, and asks him about the points of law, his area of expertise. The lawyer has no difficulty answering, and is commended for being correct in his knowledge. And if he puts it into practise, he will find eternal life. Round one to Jesus: The lawyer has been exposed as knowing the answer all along, and perhaps that makes him feel quite a fool, and

even more so because Jesus, who is no lawyer has marked his homework: perhaps he feels patronised and humiliated as well. Anxious to come out on top, he asks a supplementary question for Jesus to define who, how close a person constitutes a neighbour.

By now, Jesus has read him like a book: he sees the discomfort and the struggle with keeping his pride and dignity, his status and reputation amongst his peers and onlookers. He tells a story that mirrors the attitude he reads in the lawyer's face and questions. A story that describes a priest prioritising prudence over compassion: keeping his distance from a dead or dying man to avoid ritual contamination that would prevent him carrying out his proper priestly duties. A Jewish man – a Levite – doing the same avoiding, perhaps because the man was unknown to him, he had urgent business, didn't want to get involved ... Likelihood is, we can all too easily imagine why passing at a safe distance might seem the better option in that moment. Jesus is illustrating the problem of putting religious conventions, and a multitude of other potentially conflicting commitments above the basic commandment to love the neighbour. In case we are content to think there is no solution here, to say, 'this is life, it is complicated sometimes, and this is how things are', Jesus proceeds to illustrate the right action.

To make his point, Jesus chooses a Samaritan to be the righteous person. This ethnic group is shunned and despised by the locals, the Jews. The Samaritan, therefore, is loving not just his neighbour but his enemy. He has paused his journey to check out this bundle of a beaten man on the roadside, to draw near and find out what is needed. Putting aside his own fears, his expectation of hostility, being unwelcome, risking being mistaken for the perpetrator by the next person to come along. Making it his business, using his own resources lavishly to tend the wounds with his own hands that would have been slapped and spat on if the man had been any more able. Moving him gently to an inn, and staying overnight with him; being sure the innkeeper was not out of pocket. I wonder what the innkeeper felt towards Samaritans before and after this?

Jesus says elsewhere in the gospels, I come not to judge but to save. I love the ending to the lawyers attempts to undermine Jesus because it beautifully illustrates this attitude. Jesus merely asks the lawyer to identify who he thinks was being the neighbour to the dying man. The lawyer cannot sidestep this, he either must admit to the obvious, or say nothing.

The lawyer answers Jesus, thereby gives evidence against himself: he *can* see what loving your neighbour means. He can also see that pride and adherence to temple ritual, and just looking the other way - all exclusive attitudes - get in the way of neighbourly love.

He can see all this, but still he cannot bring himself to use the name Samaritan, he refers instead impersonally to 'The one who shows mercy'; to elevate and recognise a Samaritan is to go too far. He stands condemned by his own admissions, he knows all the right answers even though it is not what he practises.

Jesus has come to save, not to judge, so he says no more than "Go and do likewise". If the lawyer can, he is promised eternal life.

Jesus says it to the lawyer, he says it to us.

Its easy to be afraid of losing the good opinion of others if we dare side with those who are widely viewed as a bit dubious, even actively marginalised. It risks our reputation and group identity if we go against the norms of our social group. It sounds so obvious put like that but these are all the subtleties of prejudices and pride. It is probably the hardest of the temptations to spot in ourselves because we naturally aspire to be thought well of, to adhere to the successful and attractive. However, we cannot make ourselves available to God and open to loving the width of God's family, if we are not able to cross to the other side and draw near where there is need. The psalmist asks, 'Teach me Lord, lead me in your truth'; the retort comes, 'He will guide the humble in doing right and teach his ways to the lowly.'

Like the lawyer, we are invited and urged to move from knowing what is the right thing in theory, to putting it into practice. To move from learning the commandments as impersonal, disembodied doctrine, and letting it move into practical action, our wills, our hearts. The difference between 'love your neighbour', and naming the neighbour, the Samaritan, making it personal and active compassion. Because the answers are not out of reach above us, or the other side of the sea, the answers are very near to us; it is in your mouth – that is, in the scripture, teaching and laws we recite, and in our hearts – the internalisation of that teaching. That it is in our mouth and heart for us to observe, just as it was for the lawyer, is comforting and uncomfortable. Uncomfortable because it leaves us no excuses for not knowing how to express our love for God.

“Go and do likewise”, sounds reassuringly simple but is disconcertingly challenging. We are right to pray in the collect for God to increase his mercy upon us so we may pass through things temporal and not lose our hold on things eternal.