

Reflection

Luke 10:25-37

Today's Gospel reading is one of those ones that is a bit problematic. Not because of what is said, but rather because it has become so much part of our culture, and with that the shock of the reading has been tamed. The Good Samaritan has become a "secularised saint." And yet, there is nothing in our culture that can adequately grab the nature of this story...

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.

In our culture, church and state are separated, so being an expert in the law is a secular role. This person cannot be likened to a church minister, either. He is someone who is committed to learning as much as possible about how to please God, and that includes becoming an expert in how to apply the law.

We often think negatively about that phrase "to test Jesus." The question that follows is a variation on what the various experts in the Law had debated for years. It was connected to the idea that when the whole of Israel kept the whole of the Law for a single day, then God would step in and rescue them from the Romans. Jesus would have heard variations of this question as a boy learning from the peripatetic Pharisees. This expert valued Jesus' opinion and so he engaged him in a serious discussion. He would have hardly done this if he had thought Jesus was a waste of time.

"Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

In other Gospels, it is Jesus who says to love God and love the neighbour. However, regardless of who says this, he is not the first to do so. For many years now, the two concepts had been linked: we show our love of God by loving our neighbour. The conversation could easily end there.

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

"Vindicate" – it can be used with so many negative connotations. Sometimes it's translated as wanting to "justify" himself, which in some Protestant traditions can cause confusion as we are told it is God who justifies; this is not what is meant. Most likely, this learner is simply wanting to push the conversation further. Jesus had got him to answer his own question; now he wants to push and get Jesus' opinion on the topic.

The question of "who is my neighbour" is a natural continuation of the conversation, and probably one that teachers asked of their students. Is your neighbour someone who lives in the same block? The same village? What if your parents live in the next

village – does your care of neighbour become more important than care of your parents? Imagine the teacher probing learners with such questions.

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.

Telling a story to answer a question was a very typical thing for Jewish teachers to do. It was a story that would have been part of life. Anyone who travelled on their own took the risk this man in the story took. It's a normal, everyday story.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

We can choose to justify the actions of the priest and Levite in this story – if the man was dead, they would be unclean and unable to do what was needed in the temple. However, against this, there was an obligation to bury the dead, even when this meant becoming unclean. We can also justify their actions because it would have been unsafe to stop. The bandits had already attacked one person – what was there to stop them attacking the next?

But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

It's hard to find an equivalent of the Samaritan in today's society that captures the full extent of this character. It has to be someone who is utterly loathed by the whole of a culture, so I wondered about a kid in unit 18 as a possible equivalent, but that is only one part of the issue with the Samaritan.

The Samaritan is going on a long journey, which was a rare event. It might have been for a business transaction, or to bring information to the Romans, but it almost certainly was not simply because he wanted to travel and have a holiday. There is purpose behind his travel and somewhere he has to be. There has to be – he is traveling through a place where, if anyone picks up on his accent, they will know he is a despised Samaritan.

Yet despite the purpose behind his travel, despite the danger of stopping, despite not knowing whether the man in friend or foe, he has compassion and gives the aid that is needed. However, it is not only first aid that was done, he took the vulnerable traveller to a place of safety and paid two day's wages to ensure his care (with the promise of more money if needed). How many of us would do that for a friend? How many would do it for a stranger?

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."

The traditional constructs of a “neighbour” were deconstructed and the question turned around. It is no longer about where are the limits of neighbourliness, but rather a question of how are we a neighbour to those who need us?

How does this apply in our lives today?:

Go and do likewise.