

A Reader Writes

Please take a few moments to read Luke 10. 25 – 37.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is only to be found in Luke's Gospel and is perhaps the best known of all Jesus' stories. Known and recited by practising church going Christians and those who use the phrase "Good Samaritan" as a metaphor without understanding the story or its message. I have been reflecting on it following a recent time of crisis for me and my family. The actions of a kind stranger helped change a difficult situation. To put it plainly and simply they rescued us.

The parable relies on well-worn stereotypes: priest and Levite as the devoted observers of the Law, and the mixed race Samaritan as one who is seen as being on the outside. The behaviour of the priest and Levite is entirely in keeping with the letter of Scripture; the wounded man might be dead, and touching a corpse would defile them (Numbers 19: 11). At the very least, helping the man would interfere with their religious duties. The Samaritan is governed by no such scruples. Ignorant of, or indifferent to, these rules, the nationality of the wounded man is of no concern to him. All that matters is that he is cared for.

By making a Samaritan the hero of the story, Jesus shatters the lawyer's religious and social values. He is asking the wrong question: not `who is my neighbour` but `How can I prove myself a neighbour?` would be more appropriate. The answer lies in the practice of mercy and compassion, which are not restricted by barriers of nationality, religious purity, or even friendship.

Jesus highlights a paradox: those preoccupied with the letter of Scripture may find themselves on the outside because they are deaf to his word. Being a `Good Samaritan` is the demonstration of the love and mercy of God to all in need, whomever and wherever they may be, or situation.

Drawing lessons from this parable today presents a challenge. The world, the society and the culture we live in is bigger, more complex, the problems often larger, the dangers more real, opinions more varied. As the scenarios change how do the lessons in the parable influence how we think and what we do? We may intend to follow the instructions of Jesus to `go and do likewise` but we fear the possible results. Confronting terror or standing up for human rights, perhaps, exposes us. And we have been taught from a child not to talk to strangers and to be wary of them.

Yet, unless we are prepared to cross the road, let down our guard, show some kindness, bear the cost, we will have failed to demonstrate our sense of mercy and compassion. Which is not only Christlike, but also reveals our basic humanity. By small acts of care/love/concern for each other, perhaps unseen, unknown, we can change lives. In short rescue them. Help when someone is lost, and confused, when someone is going through a time of terror, that place of shelter, a drink of water, the use of a mobile, or free taxi ride to place of safety are all acts of `the Good Samaritan`.

*How do we hear again the force of this,
Since `Good Samaritan` slips off the tongue
As comfortable a phrase as any is,
Worn smooth because we've heard it for so long?
Who is my neighbour? We don't need to ask,
We know that we already know the answer,
We know the duty but we shun the task.
Fear of the other grips us like a pincer:
What if they crossed our path, these refugees?
Who'd meet the cost when needs just multiply?
We fear these questions and our spirits freeze,
It's easier to turn and walk on by,
Cross over to us, whose dark paths are crossed,
Samaritan, whose cross defrays all cost.
(taken from *Parable and Paradox* by Malcolm Guite.)*

Michael