

*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.
And fear the cost – 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.ⁱ*

Arguably the best known and best loved of all Bible stories, the parable of the Good Samaritan occupies a place in our secular culture as well as in the hearts of Christians. This is a story with such clear and emphatic meaning that to preach on it takes all the effort from homilists. Indeed, it is, perhaps, a sermon which writes itself, so plain-speaking is its message. There is a rather appealing temptation to let it rest at that and to relieve us all of yet another agonising wrestle with scriptural nuance.

Well, there are many of these, as is ever the case, and I do not intend to duck them. But let it be said that this parable offers us all an invitation to practise what is 'good', a descriptor that has crept into common usage. And let us remind ourselves that Jesus talks about action here. He says, go and **do** likewise, a call to remember that what we do will drown our words, one way or the other. 'Good' is not a part of Jesus' teaching. He leaves it to the enquiring lawyer, and to us, what lies at the heart of his answer to the lawyer's question.

I rather like the German descriptor of this doer of good deeds – *der barmherziger Samariter* – the merciful or compassionate Samaritan, the one who does not pass by on the other side but who attends to the unfortunate, beaten and robbed by the roadside.

Compassion, expressed in this text by the Greek *esplanchnisthē*, is the reaction of the Samaritan, literally a gut-wrenching feeling that stirs him to generous and life-saving action. It is one of my favourite words in NT Greek, because it refers to a visceral response; one might say his guts churned. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, we ignore the promptings of the gut and rely more on rational imperatives, brain over emotion. I frequently counsel people to listen to their inner self; we have a great capacity to overrule our thinking with thought processes that subdue such passions, and there is a place for that, but the guts don't often lie; we can deceive ourselves with reason.

It may have been such thinking that causes the priest and the Levite to pass by on the other side. This road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous and a man by the roadside may well be a trap to draw them into a similar fate. Perhaps, too, the prospect of ritual defilement, of uncleanness,

drew them away, afraid of corrupting their own purity. After all, these are people who know the law of Moses.

And this, of course, is where we start. The lawyer, wishing to understand better how he should live within the law, asks Jesus, not to be adversarial, not to score a point, respectfully seeks clarification. How do you read? Says Jesus. Love God and love your neighbour, offering Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:8 as his answer. One's relationship with God, love of God, extends outwards towards one's neighbour: the teaching of the law.

But the defining question is the one that seeks clarity in who such a person might be, which finds its answer not in reasoned response, in legal argument, but in a very human story, one which so appeals to our senses of right and wrong, of goodness, that it defies contradiction.

So vivid is it that we forget this is not a true story but one devised by Jesus to provide a compassionate response to a matter of law, the same law that governs both priest and Levite as they plod on their way.

And, of course, Jesus intends that we personalise and generalise this teaching. It does not refer only to broken people we encounter between Jerusalem and Jericho. That is the path we each tread every day, in Lausanne, in Sydney Australia and the world over. It is a path we tread as members of a common humanity, wherever the need strikes us, hits us in the guts, for a compassionate response.

And we know who they are – those who risk everything on leaky boats from Indonesia to the northern shores of the country I inhabit, or who may perish in a container truck somewhere in Europe, those 15000 children who die every day from a lack of clean water and sanitation, those who suffer abuse at the hands of people who should protect and care for them, only to be told to keep it quiet – we cannot risk reputational damage to the school, the church, the political machine. The many who are victims of economic slavery that keep them tied to an income denying the basic dignities of life, or who have no access to even basic healthcare that can save a life or make it even bearable. Or who fight the personal battle of a pointless war.

In this story, it is hard sometimes to know who it is with whom we identify. Do we sometimes wait for compassion in the crises of our life? Do we look, turn away, and find cause to pass by on the other side? Do we admire, but from a distance, the response of the compassionate Samaritan – the one least likely to do good, or roll up our sleeves, get stuck into the call to help and save? And if it is not something within our own reach or capacity, can we not argue and advocate to those whose work it is to do something, that they actually meet the need and fulfil the promise?

There is an interesting logical twist in this parable, which starts in the need to love one's neighbour but ends with a definition of what it means to be a neighbour. Victim and helper are bound up in each other. Being a neighbour is reciprocal, interdependent if we go and do likewise.

ⁱ Parable and Paradox, Malcolm Guite , Canterbury Press