

## Luke 10.25-37 Ascension 14.7.2019

To the lawyer's question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' questioned "What do you read in the Scripture?" And the lawyer answered from Deuteronomy [6.5] "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart," and from Leviticus [19.18] "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." To the lawyer, a neighbour was solely a member of the Jewish race. At once, Jesus urged him to move from right answering to right living "Do this, and you will live eternally." Jesus challenged the lawyer to be disloyal to the narrow tradition he had held for many years. If the man's religious tradition invited him to despise other people, he must be disloyal to that tradition, and his disloyalty would become a virtue.

Quietly confidently, the Torah scholar had not read Leviticus fully. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself (and) you shall *love the alien as yourself*, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" [Lev. 19.34]. Then the lawyer enquired "Who is my neighbour?" He meant "Is it really possible to love everyone? Where do I draw the line?" The lawyer was quite certain that he had honoured all his good Jewish neighbours in his own narrow community set. But Jesus expanded his view that our neighbour is the one we least expect to be a neighbour. It may be anyone regardless of class, colour, race or creed; it may be the most despised. At this, the lawyer's mind squirmed, "Surely Lord, not those who watch Gogglebox in their trackie daks and moccasins?" He gasped, "No, Jesus, you're surely not going to give me my worst nightmare ever. If I were the mugged Jew of which you spoke, left helpless for dead, at the mercy of slaving predators or carrion crows, and from my blackened eyes I saw, horror of horrors, my hated enemy of centuries, the face of a Samaritan, a doer of mercy, showing me compassionate love, no, no, Jesus, I shudder at the very thought."

Between Jews and Samaritans, existed ancient, entrenched bitterness. There were three provinces in Palestine, Galilee, Samaria and Judea. Samaria was squashed in between the other two. The Samaritans were incomers, half-caste descendants of Northern Jews who had intermarried with foreigners who replaced the majority Jews taken into exile. These were treated as a half-breed mongrel race. The only way to look at a Samaritan was down your nose, while holding it at the same time.

In Jesus' story, of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer was amazed that such philanthropy could possibly be possible from such a scum-of-the-earth despised alien other, and not from card-carrying true-blue Jews, who were the privileged employees at the very heart of worship, the Jewish Temple. At story's end, when Jesus asked "which proved the true neighbour?" the lawyer could not even whisper the word "Samaritan." He replied "The one who showed mercy," the one who functioned as another Christ figure by giving life-saving compassion. But, the idea of a Samaritan being a good neighbour to a Jew or a Jew being neighbourly to a Samaritan, horrified the lawyer. Jesus had given him a knock-out punch: all people should be neighbours, as all are made in God's image.

Mentally, Jesus' team were just where the lawyer was. Most journeying Jews practised a kind of apartheid by taking a long detour around Samaritan soil. For Jesus to identify with a despised Samaritan, was to identify with the group upon whom the "sons of thunder," James and John, when refused admittance to a Samaritan town, had sought to call down consuming fire to erase it. Given the state of hostility between Jew and Samaritan, such hatred was quite understandable.

But Jesus' identification fits perfectly with his pattern of reversal of the world's wrong values and emphases, with his breaking down long-held walls, with his turning the accepted world upside down.

This is exactly how our commitment to follow the way of Jesus is to be defined, from the perspective of the fallen, abandoned ones, the powerless, the downtrodden, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the anonymous ones, all, who have no societal status at all. Jesus held a soft spot for the people of Samaria. For the first time, Jesus revealed to the Samaritan much-married woman at the well that he was truly the Messiah [John 8.48]. He pointed out that the sole leper in ten who came back to offer thanks was a Samaritan [Luke 17.11]. Today, he made a Samaritan the model of Christian love.

In aiding the beaten up fellow, the Samaritan had stepped over the ancient, bloodied line which separated "us" from "them," to teach us the real meaning of "Good." He did not care from a sense of duty; he cared because his heart would not allow him to do otherwise than stop to render what assistance he could.

Just like the Jewish lawyer, we are tribal by instinct. We are most comfortable with and we care greatly about those most like us. But, when we feel as lost as a teenager without her cell phone, when we are lying half-dead by the road-side of life and in need of a helping hand to bring us compassion and mercy, when we accept our brokenness, and we receive life-saving mercy, no matter who offers it, any "otherness" ceases and we experience our common humanity.

Each of us has the capacity to care. It is within our competence to say the necessary kind word, to offer needed sympathy, to give wanting support. These are the Good Samaritan's drops of oil and wine which, when rubbed in, can take the pain out of the other's wounds.

The story ends with Jesus telling the inquisitive lawyer to act just like the despised Samaritan: "Do this and you will live." We, too, must make uncommon goodness our common virtue. May we choose to grasp the easy flow of grace on offer to help us make natural, habitual and spontaneous the call of our King.

I said spontaneous. In my school recently, an eight-year-old, Sarah, wet her pants in class. Her little heart stopped as a trickle formed on the floor. Horrified, she knew that when the class went out to play, they would notice her incontinence. Susie, across the row, saw her panic. Immediately, she walked to the water cooler and brought back a cup of water, slightly tripped, spilling the water on the floor, to cover the tell-tale mark. Teacher looked up from her "Best Bets," "Oh, you butterfingers!" and resumed choosing the form. At play, later, Sarah said "You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Susie whispered "I wet my pants once, too."