

Pentecost 7
15/07/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Amos 7: 7-17
Coloss.1:1-14
Luke 10: 25-37

The Good Samaritan

Sermon by Bruce Barber

You may well be thinking: surely we are not up for yet another sermon on the Good Samaritan? It must almost certainly be the case that of all the sermons we have heard over a lifetime, this parable will head the list. Here it is again today. But how do we hear it, as if for the first time? That is a problem for all of us.

The truth is that it has long exercised the imagination of preachers from the very beginning. Here is one of its earliest interpreters, that of the third century theologian, Origen of Alexandria:

The man who fell among thieves is Adam. Jerusalem represents heaven, and Jericho, to which the traveler journeyed, represents the world. The robbers are our human enemies, the devil and his minions. The priest stands for the Law, the Levite for the Prophets. The Good Samaritan is Christ himself. The beast on which the wounded man is set is Christ's body, which bears the fallen Adam. The inn is the Church, the two pence, the Father and the Son, (we might have proposed the two sacraments) and the Samaritan's promise to come again is Christ's second Advent.

We can imagine the preaching invitations which must have flooded in after hearing this brilliant exposition! Who would not want a preacher who could weave such magic! A reading surely both imaginative and instructive, much to be preferred to the bland moralism of recent centuries, which sees in the parable only an ethical prescription, as if all the Christian faith is a spur to good works.

For the fact is that, as with Mother's Day and apple pie, it is impossible to speak evil of the Good Samaritan. He is, after all, the patron saint of all who equate Christianity with good deeds, and who have no time for those like the lawyer putting Jesus to the test for an answer to finer points of obscure doctrines.

As an additional bonus, the lawyer is the layman's model of virtue – that's you – in solid contrast to the heartless unconcern of the religious professional – that's me. Lucky you!

All this is perfectly understandable, as from a thousand pulpits the Good Samaritan is proclaimed as the prototype of true Christianity, especially in our day when untold millions of wounded travelers, with their insatiable demands, confront us on each day's journey as they pass before our eyes on every television programme.

So it is quite understandable that the world increasingly knows nothing more of the Bible than this popular tale, serving as it does to describe any selfless deed. We have been reminded of this again in recent weeks by the horrifying shooting death of Brendan Keilar, and the wounding of the Dutch tourist who have been hailed as its very epitome.

But the real question is: does Jesus tell the parable merely to show that his way is essentially no different from the natural kindness in the best of human hearts? He does not. If there is a lesson to be learnt from the parable, it is surely this: that it is a dangerous enterprise to ask specific questions of a general theological maxim. The lawyer was engaged in such a quest. Acknowledging the claim of the law in general, he finds it in need of refinement: Just who is my neighbour? It is a reasonable request given that in Jesus' day 'the neighbour' was someone you chose for yourself. One's personal enemies hardly needed to be included, but equally, Pharisees regarded non-Pharisees as outside the circle of neighbourliness. As for aliens, the worst of which were despised Samaritans, they had no claim at all on one's time or concern. This old enmity between Jews and Samaritans had a long history. It went back to the split between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah after King Solomon's death. The outcome was that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans, whom they regarded, amongst other things, as being religiously unclean because of their intermarriage with pagans. Perhaps the closest analogy for us is the contemporary hostility between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. In any case, it is a real question for the legalists of the day: who is my neighbour?

Jesus' answer comes, startling, as always, by converting the general maxim into the specific address, by changing the noun into the verb: 'Go and be neighbourly'. With that, the world changes for the lawyer. The specific introduction of the Samaritan into the scene appalls him. So will the world change for us if we allow truth to call in question our presuppositions. The lawyer needed to know about the Samaritan. That is not our need. What do we need? Presumably to be shocked, as the lawyer was shocked. But really, how do we manage that, in view of this parable's successful domestication after so many centuries?

Perhaps its most shocking confrontation would be this; by refuting the tired old commonplace that Christians come to church to get their questions answered. We most certainly do not. On the contrary, if the parable can be trusted, we come to church to be *given* the right question. We come to hear something equally as confronting as it was for the lawyer. For him, the question had to be, not 'Who is my neighbour?' but 'Who proved to be neighbourly'. What questions of ours need reframing? That is the issue.

The one thing needful for us today, then, is to allow the parable to read us, rather than we to read it. So if we want to let this happen, we have to try to start at the beginning, whatever that might be presumed to be. One place that we could start would be to understand better Luke's intent for the parable, since both it, and that of the prodigal Son, are to be found only in this gospel, which perhaps explains Luke's popularity. Indeed, so successful is Luke that we struggle to understand the integrity of the other gospels because of the imprint his gospel has left for us.

In a word, Luke is concerned to write a gospel of theological hospitality, which is why he begins the genealogy of Jesus at the beginning of the gospel with Adam, because you can't go further back and be more inclusive than that. To that end, geographical movement becomes of the

utmost significance as he reinterprets the tradition, which, incidentally, is why he finishes his second volume of the Acts of the Apostles by getting the gospel to Rome. Again, you can't go further out than that.

In the same way, we recall that as we have progressed through this year of readings from this gospel, we have had a geography lesson: John the Baptist belongs in the region of the Jordan, Jesus to the region of Galilee - with brief forays into enemy territory, where the demons both live and are defeated - before beginning, two weeks ago, his long journey to rejection in Jerusalem. So it is on precisely *this* journey that the significance of the non-assistance of the priest and the Levite is to be found, prefiguring Jesus' ultimate rejection in the very city of God.

This is why, according to the parable, the doing of good deeds *as such* is not the essence of the gospel. We are helped to see this by noting where Luke inserts the story. It follows the passage that we read last week, the mission of the seventy, which, by the way, is the biblical number for inclusion and universality, and so fits beautifully the Gentile mission. These seventy are to act as scouts for Jesus' impending presence. They return from their mission with joy, we were told, because the name of Jesus renders demons powerless. That is, they are joyful, not because of their good deeds, but because they have learned to depend entirely on the name and action of God. It is *this* achievement then that is the prelude to the parable. And its sequel next week is the visit of Jesus to Martha and Mary, where 'the one thing needful' is not Martha's busy service 'being a good Samaritan' in our terms, but rather is it 'the good portion' chosen by Mary, 'who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching'.

So the whole chapter contains not the stale news about our potential for good works, which we never seem to realize, a perpetual and exhausting offering of endless acts of service. Rather the good news is that we may rejoice even in this world, inhabited by its myriad demons, if we recognize that our first need is to hear the words of Jesus offering to reframe our life.

This is surely the contrasting foil for the lawyer, of whom we need to know no more than that he 'desires to justify himself'. In this he intends to seek his own destiny, even as one who, like Martha, is equally anxious and troubled. That, of course, is inevitably the end of all self interest, religious, or in our day, secular, since the demands of the self never end.

But Jesus gives him no help. The parable is bad news indeed from the lawyer's perspective, as it must first of all be for us too. He hears that even the best in his world fail. Priest and Levite pass by. Help arrives from an entirely unexpected quarter. The twist is not the cynical conclusion that 'good people are really hypocrites', or that 'the really good people are the despised, rejected, alienated poor'. The parable does not extol the virtues of the underdog. It simply emphasizes the limits to human goodness.

Good News? Of course, but only when we recognize the intent of the gospel. The good news is not the humanistic cliché that we must serve our fellows out of our all too limited resources of love, patience and opportunity. Any person of goodwill will try to do that, Christians included. But you don't need God to tell you this – something that the current crop of atheists parading their respective pathologies appear to have only just grasped.

The Good News is that Jesus is himself the Good Samaritan. In this, Origen, if you recall at the beginning, got it exactly right. As the Good Samaritan, on the journey - Origen suggests - from the heights of heaven, Jerusalem, to Jericho, to the depths of this world's needs, Jesus makes us all neighbours. This is precisely what the seventy experience when they are told that 'many prophets and kings desired to see what you see and did not see'. And this is the truth that Mary recognizes by doing 'the one thing needful'.

So when in a few minutes we stretch out our hands at this table to receive a gift that we cannot take for ourselves, we do so in recognition of the good news that we are not in the first place, 'Good Samaritans' at all. We are a neighbourhood of wounded travellers. Therefore we belong not to a church of 'Good Samaritans', but to the church of the Good Samaritan.

And that is what makes all the difference in the world.