

**Amos 7:7-17**  
**Psalm 82**  
**Colossians 1:1-14**  
**Luke 10:25-37**

### **The straight test**

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A plumb line is a string attached to a heavy weight, used to test whether or not a wall, or any other construction, is perpendicular. Amos the prophet saw a vision of God holding a plumb line next to a wall which symbolised the people of God. It meant God was applying a measure to his people to see if they were standing true. The burden of Amos' prophecy was that something had slipped and the people had become warped; they had developed leanings they were not supposed to have.

There are many difficult things in the reading from Amos, but hold that image of the plumb line in mind as we reflect on the reading from Luke. The story of the Good Samaritan is told in response to a test question directed at Jesus. A Lawyer, someone who was an expert in what the Law of Moses was supposed to mean, wanted to find out if Jesus' teachings were truly in conformity with traditional beliefs. "What must I do to gain Eternal Life?" was a hostile question. Jesus replies by turning the question back on the questioner and the answer he gives is one that no one could possibly argue with: Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself, he says. Jesus says: "You know the answer; do this, and you will live". The matter could have stopped there but the Lawyer wanted further clarification: "Who is my neighbour?" That is to say: "Are there any from whom the law allows us withhold love?" The story following is one in which we are drawn into the perspective of the man who was robbed. And, from the position of lying in the gutter with him, we are allowed to see that there is a certain class of people whom the Law allows to do nothing when faced with a critical situation. In terms of this story, they are the religious leaders of the day. There were good and proper reasons why they passed by the man in need, but the question is: "Is that really what the Law intended?" Enter the Good Samaritan: the power of this idea is lost on us, but in context of the times, where Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another, this is an oxymoron.

Translated into current terminology it would come out as something like Good Islamic Terrorist came along, or a Good al-Qaeda Drug Baron was passing. The point is, the person who showed mercy and gave ongoing support was, according to the imagination of the times, the most unlikely candidate. The man robbed found himself assisted by his arch enemy. Think of the person you most dislike. Imagine being shown compassion and having your needs met by that person, and you begin to approach the meaning of the action here. When the Lawyer asked: "Who is my neighbour?" He wanted to know if there are any limits to mercy. Jesus' follow up question is: "Which of these proved to be a neighbour?" That is: who was the merciful one? The ground shifts. We are still concerned with what is legitimate, orthodox practice of the faith, but Jesus' goes 'outside the square' to make the point that the inner meaning of the Law is that love should be demonstrated, not withheld, and mercy is capable of crossing boundaries. What he is really saying to the clever lawyer is that if we are going to be concerned with what is "legally required" amongst us, to the point that mercy is withheld, the household

of the church has taken on leanings it was never meant to have. Standing firm and clear on a foundation of Love, the household of God can really only express its vocation in one way: by offering mercy, kindness and gracious love to others. And this could include the possibility of showing love to the unclean, and the unlovable; enemies such as those we most despise. What Jesus gives us in this story is like a plumb line, a straight test, which shows us what the Love of God looks like when it is applied in the world. We can hold this story up like a plumb line in order to gain a perspective on what is happening around us, and amongst us. It shows what it would look like if we allow ourselves to love God, and our neighbour, fully. It shows us that such love might even look a bit warped, by accepted standards; like loving Asylum Seekers, or Prisoners, or people with AIDS, when others would readily consign them to the scrap heap of life.

It is also useful to think of this story from the point of view of the story teller realising that, for many of his day, including the religiously orthodox, Jesus' own loving of the despised and rejected was a scandal which led them to put him to death. But in this Jesus was God's plumb line: he is the measure, set among us, which reveals what the true extent of the love and mercy of God. In him we see that the God we are attempting to love with all our heart and soul and mind and strength is the one who reaches out to us in our brokenness, our woundedness, and our estrangement from all that is good. And God does more than that, in Jesus God pours in the oil of healing and the wine of new life that we may have a share in Eternal Love. And although, like the Samaritan, Jesus has passed on from here in the physical sense, in him the price of healing has been paid and we are free to accept and enjoy living in the benefits of God's grace.

This is a big day. Amelia sets out on the path of life. Davis rejoices in many years of serving Jesus Christ. This is also St Benedict's day: who called his people to live together preferring nothing before Jesus Christ. As we go from here, what are we to DO? This is what our text suggests: accept the merciful love, graciously given to us, and strive to love others as we ourselves have been loved.