

The Road to Jericho

Based on the Parable of Good Samaritan - Luke 10:25 to 37

Sermon · Not stated (file created 8 September 2010)

Last week while discussing the parable of the Sower I mentioned that it was a classic in its own right. The parable of the Good Samaritan would outdo all other parables, as it points us to the very fundamentals of Christian living. I started off imagining that it would be an easy parable to preach on. People know the story well enough and the plot is not complicated either. The sermon theme looks fairly simple and the learning appear to be straightforward. - **“Let’s all be like the Samaritan and do good deeds like him”.**

We all know that helping people who are hurt is good, that compassion for those in need is desirable. So is this then what this parable all about? There seems to be nothing particularly new here. Jesus, however, could not have been telling us what we already knew. We know that parables of Jesus are designed to shake us up ... to break apart our preconceived notions of how “things are supposed to be” ... to open us up to new realities. The whole narrative describes working compassion as contrasted to selfishness, and of love as contrasted hate.

There is a twist in the story as they say. Maybe there are several twists! Let us look for the nuance in this parable which a casual reading may not bring out.

What prompted Jesus to narrate this parable?

The parable was triggered when a smart lawyer trying to outwit Jesus asked Him:

“Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Very often we tend to interpret those words as a request for information as to how to have life beyond death, and indeed there is an element of that in the question. But what we normally miss out in our “I, me and mine” world, is that “eternal life” needs to be understood not just as a continued existence beyond the grave, but as leading a quality life in our present existence as a prologue to the existence thereafter. This continuity cannot just happen from a sinful, unchristian existence to a glorified life in Christ. The quality of life is all about sharing in the life of Jesus. It is about walking with Jesus. It is about being all that Jesus would want us to be in this world as much as beyond.

So what does Jesus do? Well, firstly, he points the expert to the Law itself:

“What is written in the law? how readest thou?” He asked.

At this, the expert replies stating the same Old Testament Law which Jesus had affirmed as the greatest of the Commandments:

‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.’

Then comes the tricky one, the expert hoping that he could score one over Jesus. He now wants to delve further and questions Jesus as to who is to be considered as his neighbour. And it is at this Jesus tells what we know as “The Parable of the Good Samaritan” - a story which would have challenged the expert’s worldview. A story which if we look in its depth, beneath its otherwise all too familiar settings and characters will have the potential to completely change how we see the real meaning of life.

Dramatisation

There would have been no need to re-count this all too familiar story. But remember we are on the hunt for the hidden treasures of wisdom which our Lord wants us to possess. I would not dare to distort the story as stated by our Lord or in any manner depart from the place, structure and characters as we read in the Gospel. But I would like to present a dramatised version which would help us see matters in a perspective which will reveal to us the inner meaning our Lord wants us to know.

The assault on the Road to Jericho

“How unexpected the day of my end had come upon me”, he regretfully thought as he lay by the roadside. With each painful breath, he could smell the dust, his own blood, and now as the day grew hotter, he felt life ebbing out slowly on

that seventeen-mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

He had thought he would be free from trouble if he travelled in the morning; he'd always been comfortable starting his journey early in the morning. But we know that he would seem to have been foolish because the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho was a road that was very steep with plenty of twists and turns. It was the happy hunting ground for all kinds of anti social elements, a place of danger. And it was on this road that the traveller received a mighty beating. He had not even seen the thieves coming ... a blur of motion out of the bushes ... an incoherent sound of yelling and swinging clubs and then they were gone ... leaving him naked, bleeding and broken to die on the Road to Jericho stripped of all his belongings. Helpless, life slowly oozing out. He wondered if this would be the day he would die ... here on the Road to Jericho ... **alone ... uncared for.**

A ray of hope

As the sun rose above the hillside he thought of a Psalm he had learned in the synagogue ... "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth ..."

Then he sees someone ... a priest ... and tries to gasp out for help ... but could muster only a hiss and bubbling noise with his mouth full of his blood ... He then sees the priest give a horrified glance in his direction and then quickly look forward at the road ahead. As he watches the priest quietly pass by he passes out due to the loss of blood, intense sense of disappointment, exhaustion, dilution and perhaps even anger. Again he is left alone to die a lonely death on the Road to Jericho.

The disappointment

Later he awakes to the crunch, crunch of footsteps coming down the road. As he struggles to keep his eyes open, he saw a Levite, a temple helper who is passing by on the far side of the road, as if he were not even there. "Of course, he knows I am here, otherwise, why walk on the far side of the road" he thought fighting the unconsciousness setting in. And as the Levite heads over the hill the wounded man closes his eyes. He decides it is his time to die so he says a prayer.

Shattered hope?

In the middle of his prayer he stops as he hears footsteps approaching. Through his half closed, blurred by blood eyes he sees someone coming up the road, with a donkey. A ray of hope kindles in his heart. Yet as the person gets closer, the man's hope fades as he realises that it is a Samaritan, an enemy by tradition. He thinks "He has seen me and he is coming towards me. Stupid Samaritan, I have no money to steal, nor clothes to take" Mortal fear grips him, thinking the Samaritan is now going to finish him off, and as he watches, the Samaritan rushes down the ditch towards him. Everything goes blank ... this is it ... he wonders about heaven ... and passes out.

On with the Parable:

Let us move on with the parable.....

Later, much later, he awakens to find himself in an inn and this is not what he thought heaven would look like. Then the realisation descended on him that he is still alive. But how? He tries to get up but his now bandaged ribs made him cry out loud.

Hearing the noise, an innkeeper pokes his head around the corner ... "So you are awake, I didn't think you were going to make it." "Thank you for saving me," he said. The innkeeper replied, "Don't thank me ... it was some Samaritan that brought you in and paid your bill too. Generous for a Samaritan ... we don't usually allow them in here, you know ... this is a respectable place ... but since he has helped you out and had some money, I figured he probably was OK." The man said, "I guess so, thank you. I need to rest now, and think." And then he passed off to a peaceful sleep.

A reconstruction of his thoughts would be a very interesting exercise. Here he is cared for, with new lease of life, not knowing whom to thank, his heart filling up with gratitude to that unknown Samaritan whom he considered an enemy by tradition and thanking God for bringing him along. Can we imagine the joy the Samaritan would have felt when he on his return journey learns that this person had fully recovered and gone his way? It is hard to describe but you and I can experience this joy any time.

Did you ever see this person?

I did, many times in my 67 years of existence. I saw him on the Jericho Road, in India, in China, in England, in France, in Africa, in the United States, and elsewhere. I did nothing for him. I would feel compassion for the person scoring one over the priest and the Levite who perhaps did not feel even that. But I just walked on convincing myself that someone else will help the person. I imagined a helpless state convincing myself that it is beyond my capacity to help him. I am

sure each one present here this evening would have also seen him and may have reacted more or less in the way I did.

Did we ever stop to think what terrible thoughts must have been going on in his mind when we saw him? How desperate, lost, helpless, uncared for and dejected he might have felt? Were we able to relate to his troubles? Did we think hard enough to find a way out for him, console him, and pray for him?

I dare not answer those questions.

Now when I realise my failings and am all set to walk that extra mile with him, I am afraid that I may not get as many opportunities as I did in the past to be of some service to such people, my neighbours. I carry within me today an intense feeling of guilt thinking of all those lost opportunities.

What is your state of mind this evening? It is critical that we find an honest answer to that question.

Status of Samaritans

The plot becomes more gripping when we understand that there was a long history of enmity between Jews and Samaritans, going back several hundreds of years. Inevitably, there were wrongs on both sides. There were rival temples. Ultimately the conflict was in part religious and in part racial. We know this story of hatred quite well. So we know the Samaritan was not helping a fellow Samaritan. We do that all the time. This evening we hear this parable of Jesus in which something different happens. In this parable it is the enemy who is the saviour, not the priest, not the temple helper, the saviour is the one from the other side of the tracks, the saviour is “one of those less desirable people”. In this unusual parable of Jesus, help comes from an unexpected person. He shows compassion and attends to the man’s needs. He, the outsider, an enemy, fulfils the role of a **neighbour**.

The challenge before us is the kind of choice we make when we encounter a person in need. Where there are people, sufferings would also be present. An honest introspection would tell us how we respond to such sufferings before us. Instinctively we steer clear when we encounter someone in distress. Why add on to an already burdened life, we ask ourselves in self-justification.

How do we sort this matter out? Just seek an honest answer to these questions. Do you look upon people as an inconvenience or an opportunity to serve? In our minds, are people obstacles to the fulfilment of our God-given purpose, or do people serve a central role in God’s purpose for our lives?

Our response usually depends on how our day is going. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus offers penetrating insights into what it means to be someone’s neighbour. He provides His own commentary on the second greatest commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” In this statement He encapsulated six of the Ten Commandments. He describes two religious individuals who conveniently choose to ignore the needs of people on their way to accomplish their tasks. He then describes one individual who sets aside his important tasks in order to serve another person, an enemy, and so fulfil this Second Greatest commandment. He chose to be the neighbour to a stranger, perhaps a traditional enemy.

The million dollar question tonight is which description will best fit you and me?

The Jericho Road

We now know who our neighbours are. Let us be very clear about it. It is not the person who would knock your door to borrow a cup of sugar, or the next door pretty one very easy to fall for and love. We are talking about a different kind of neighbour and a different kind of love. An unconditional love with no expectation of being reciprocated. The real neighbours Jesus has talked about are others, anyone we who is in need of help, wherever we may encounter them.

That brings an interesting issue before us. But where would we find such neighbours? The answer is simple: they are found on the Jericho Road.

The Jericho Road is not confined to that one stretch of road between Jerusalem and Jericho. It is wherever violence and oppression are found; it is a road of suffering that runs through every corner of the world. The Jericho Road is found in the wards of an overcrowded hospital, where the sick and the forgotten lie unattended. It is found in the cells of an overcrowded prison. It is found in the poor settlements on the edge of a great city, where families are torn apart by violence. It is found wherever a guard or a bystander is shot down without reason. It is found in the mental hospital where many languish unwanted and uncared for. It is found in the hospital ward where a woman is assaulted and left grievously injured. It is found along a tense and heavily guarded border between hostile nations, each ready to destroy the other. It runs through the heart of every troubled city. It is found wherever children and young women have been taken, abused, and killed without mercy, in tragedies our own communities still remember with grief. It is the same road on which a man may be shot simply for standing in another’s way. We could go on, for the Jericho Road is everywhere.

The Jericho Road, then, is any place where violence is done; it is any place where people are oppressed; it is any place where people are robbed of their dignity, their love, their bread, or their freedom. The Jericho Road is always with us.

Just step out of this Church and you are on that Jericho Road.

What do we learn?

So what does this story tell us today? This parable of Jesus is to invite all of us to have hearts of love, hearts of love for anyone who is suffering, wherever that suffering is found. Jesus in this parable defies our traditions of building walls between insiders and outsiders. For all the people of our planet in the light of this parable are to be seen as neighbours. We need to see, to appreciate and to embrace the whole human community which we are called to be in relationship with.

But finally, there is one more revolutionary twist in the story. Not only is the Samaritan a neighbour in our story, he is also the Christ figure in our story. See Him bandaging the wounds and pouring oil and wine upon them. See the limitlessness of His compassion. And is that not a picture of Jesus. For when we feel battered, down and out, Jesus reaches out in loving kindness to us, to put us right and to fix us that we might once more embrace life and participate in the cycle of kindness of which He is the author.

You see, Jesus invites us to have hearts of love, and you can't pay anyone to have a heart of love. You can pay for and get anything else, but you can not buy hearts of love. You can't pay for them. It's a gift from God, and you don't have to be a Christian to have one. You can find loving hearts all over the world. What God wants for people more than anything is to have that heart of love. ... And that is the purpose of this parable.

But this parable is also an invitation to be kind and merciful and loving to... our enemies. Yes, our enemies, people we would love to hate. Just as it was the case with the traveller and the Samaritan.

In Christ we have the ultimate good neighbour. And in kindness, He invites us to share in His life