

The Seventh Sunday of Trinity, The Good Samaritan

10th July 2016

Preaching a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan creates problems for the preacher and it has even been referred to as “The preachers’ nightmare”

When a story is very familiar, there is a real tendency for listeners to assume they know what it means and what the preacher is going to say and whilst it is certainly true to say that this is one of the best-known and best-loved of the parables, it is certainly not true that it is one of the best-understood.

There are some features of the passage where the problem is one of a lack of familiarity. For example, do we know that this story was told as an answer to a specific question asked Jesus by a lawyer? Do we understand the type of story that Jesus was telling and the shock impact of the hero of the story being a Samaritan?

Then there is the problem of the tendency of theologians in the past of turning the story into something that it never was an allegory, where every detail of the story means something particular.

Then there is the temptation to moralize. Secular thinkers have taken the story out of its spiritual context and turned it into a statement of Utopian type of caring for one another, that ignores what Jesus was really trying to tell. This story is in fact the darling of those who advocate the “social gospel”, the belief that our faith is about social action.

The “Expert in the law” was a highly respected person in the religious system of the day. Pharisees and synagogue rulers would seek out this highly educated person to tell them of the minutiae of the interpretation of the Law of Moses. This man would have been highly skilled in understanding and applying the law in a way that gave very specific and clear directions as to what to do and what not to do.

The question that he asks goes right to the heart of the message of the Bible. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is the question that every man, woman and child should be asking. “What do I have to do to go to heaven?” is the way we may ask it. There is no denying that it is a good question, if a simple one.

But there are two problems with the question. The first problem is that it assumes that inheriting eternal life comes as a result of something we do. The second problem is the manner in which the question is asked. We read that the lawyer “stood up to test Jesus” – a dangerous game if there ever was one! Jesus gives a very straightforward answer to what is a very easy question. In accordance with the custom of the day he answered by asking another question, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer replies by giving the classic rabbinic answer. It was a combination of scriptures from Leviticus and Deuteronomy which summed up everything in the law. Jesus confirms that this is the correct answer and there the conversation could have ended.

But this exchange has raised two more difficulties. Firstly, the Lawyer now looks foolish. He has, with great ceremony stood up, asked an obvious question and got an obvious answer. The crowd may well have been giggling at the sight of this self-important, learned lawyer being put in his place by the young rabbi from Galilee. So we read “he wanted to justify himself”. The lawyer, as most of us, cared deeply about how he was perceived, so he asks a supplementary question. But there is something else happening here. Jesus answer “Do this and you will live” has in it the sense of needing to continue to do this, every moment of every day, so surely, thinking must go, there must be some limitation on what is expected here. After all, how could someone be expected to live a life of total love to God and their neighbour? So the supplementary question to Jesus is a justification question.

It is in this context that Jesus tells us the famous story. It is a story to answer the question, “and who is my neighbour?”

And what a wonderful story this is. Jesus, the master story-teller tells us a story in the classic genre of the “story of three”. Everyone listening would know that the first two characters would get it wrong, and the third would get it right. The story of a dangerous journey between Jerusalem and Jericho was well-known, the plight of the man would arouse sympathy, and the indifference of the priest and Levite would horrify the lawyer, and raise knowing looks among Jesus followers as Jesus moved towards the climax of the story at Jerusalem. The lawyer would have assumed that the one who would get it right would be a Pharisee or similar. And Jesus’ followers would be waiting for the punch line – a parable is a story with a sting in the tail. Surely the hero of the story is to be

the average Jew, who Jesus champions?

The shock of what comes next is hard to over-emphasize. The Samaritans were the sworn enemies of the Jews. Prayers were offered by some Jews that the Samaritans would not inherit eternal life. The very idea that a Samaritan would be the one who Jesus would put up as a model of integrity, as an example of love for others, and that Jesus would tell the lawyer to go and imitate the love of the Samaritan was unthinkable. The story was told to answer the question that one who is our neighbour is the worst of our enemies. That is the one that we are to love as ourselves. What possible response could there be to this other than the thought that this represents a level of love that is entirely beyond anything that we can find in ourselves?

This parable is so familiar that that it is almost impossible to recapture the original shocking impact. The modern interpretation of the expression Good Samaritan has been hijacked as a name for someone who does good deeds but for the initial hearers, it was praising a member of a despised ethnic minority. What Jesus was really talking about was the fact that we often try to hide battles of the heart and conscience behind theological arguments. Jesus turned the question around so that the challenge could not be avoided.

If we take on the challenge of loving our neighbour then we must be prepared to have our lives changed and resources diverted and if we take on a commitment we must be prepared to see it out to the end. The priest and the scribe walked by on the other side. As Christians we are not allowed to do that.

Jesus is giving the word neighbour the widest possible meaning and not the restricted definition that human nature applies- the people whom we choose to describe as neighbours from our own narrow, prescriptive approach that does not mean that we have to get out of our own personal comfort zone. There can be no distinctions at all between human beings when it comes to being neighbourly. Our personal preferences or hang ups are irrelevant when it comes to the true definition of who is my neighbour, as Jesus challenges us to consider.

When Jesus Came to Birmingham was written by an Anglican priest named Geoffrey Stoddard Kennedy. He called his poem, 'Indifference.' Kennedy served as a chaplain in the trenches of World War I where he earned the name

“Woodbine Willie” because of his habit of giving Woodbine cigarettes to the injured and dying soldiers.

Kennedy wrote this poem during what was called ‘the great disillusion’ of the 1920’s. The English empire was crumbling, the moral certainty of the Victorian age was eroding leaving in its place only scepticism, cynicism and materialism. After four years of war, the British economy was in tatters and poverty widespread except for the few privileged. Kennedy’s love for England and his church faded in the midst of unemployment and the seeming disregard by the wealthy and religious for the desperate plight of the poor.

“When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed Him by.
They would not hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, ‘Forgive them, for they know not what they do,’
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall, and cried for Calvary.”

Kennedy was asking the same question, “who is my neighbour?” The same question is being asked today. The problem is that we know the answer but sometimes do not like being asked the question.

Amen.