

The Good Samaritan is perhaps the best known of all Jesus' parables, even though it is only found in Luke's Gospel. It has certainly entered into our language. If I say "he passed by on the other side", you know I mean an uncaring and ungenerous act. And "Samaritan" has come to mean somebody who helps at a time of crisis and is identified with the excellent charity that reaches out to those with thoughts of suicide.

That is very different from how it would have been understood in Jesus' day. For a variety of historical and religious reasons, Jews and Samaritans were at daggers drawn. Even Jesus told his disciples not to take their mission to any Samaritan town (Mt.10), and disputed with the Samaritan woman at the well about the religious stance of their two peoples, insisting "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4). All this means the parable, with its starring role for the Samaritan, would have been shocking to most of Jesus' original hearers.

Also, while many of Jesus' parables are open, rightly and fruitfully, to a variety of interpretations, the Good Samaritan has attracted more than its fair share. An elaborate medieval exposition was by way of allegory, giving every element in the story a current counterpart. So variously the traveller (mankind) on the road (life) is assailed by robbers (the devil) and, sorely wounded, is rescued by the Samaritan (Christ) who puts him on the donkey (the body of Christ, or the church) and carries him to the inn (the church or heaven) where the innkeeper (St Paul, or St Peter) receives him because of the price paid by the Samaritan (the death of Christ). Endless variations and elaborations are possible, and it is an ingenious teaching tool but I doubt whether Luke the evangelist would have recognised it.

Another famous, or perhaps notorious, gloss was Mrs Thatcher's comment that the Samaritan could not have helped unless he had been a wealth creator with spare cash in his pocket. Happily, I have not yet heard a law-and-order enthusiast arguing that Jesus was advocating a better police presence on the Jericho Road.

There is a lot of exploration why the priest and the Levite passed by on the other side. Maybe they were just mean and uncaring, or just in too much of a hurry. Maybe they were afraid it was a decoy and the robbers were still lurking among the rocks ready to pounce on them. Or, and this is the usual explanation, especially as Jesus told this parable to a teacher of the Law, maybe they were

unsure whether the man was dead, and if so, by touching the body they would have become ritually unclean and unable to perform their religious duties without an elaborate and time-consuming cleansing. If so, they had forgotten the words of the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice says the Lord". If the teacher of the Law was listening to the parable, he would have to revise his view about what is really important.

If we are listening to the parable, so will we. A more common modern emphasis is on the Samaritan being an outsider, the object of contempt and suspicion, whom the traveller (who we assume was a Jew although this is not actually stated) would not have mixed with or acknowledged in normal circumstances. That is a powerful message in a world still divided by nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, age, education, ability, etc etc. There is too much lazy "group think" in the sense of seeing people so much as groups, that we are hindered from seeing them as individual children of God. We are too often ready, in the words of the film "Casablanca" to "round up the usual suspects". There is a lesson there about needing to look again at expectations we have about certain groups of people – or indeed certain people - that they will never do anything good.

Jesus does not directly answer the original question: "Who is my neighbour"? because the parable is sort of back to front. But the answer is not hard to deduce, and very simple. The neighbour whom I should love and therefore help is anyone who needs help and whom I can help. Go and do thou likewise.

And then an unasked question - what did the traveller think of this when he recovered? Was he horrified and anxious to hush it up? Was he grateful and did he communicate his thanks to the Samaritan and did he let all his friends know what had happened? Was he sorry that he had had all his life had such a scornful view of Samaritans?

Which is a wider lesson about how we receive help when we need it. Do we receive it graciously? Not grudgingly nor obsequiously, but graciously, especially when we cannot return or repay the help?