Who is my neighbour?

A sermon preached by Tony Lemon, Lay Minister, at St Peter's Wolvercote 10 July 2022

Ref: Luke 10, 29 'But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus "And who is my neighbour?"'

Even in this secular age when knowledge of the Bible is ever more limited, today's Gospel, or at least the story it tells, is probably familiar to most people. 'The good Samaritan' is one of those biblical figures who has passed into folklore, becoming a symbol of any stranger who comes to the rescue for someone in a difficult situation or a tight corner – hence the people we know as 'The Samaritans', who come to the help of people who have reached a point of desperation. Like Jesus' other parables, the story is essentially simple – something that could readily be understood by his listeners – but it conveys profound truths, which of course shows us what a brilliant teacher Jesus was. Like many of Jesus' parables this one shows, in the words of our reading from Deuteronomy, that 'the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe' (30, v.14). The lawyer's question, 'who is my neighbour?', has resonance in every age and context. Its implications are perhaps more challenging than ever before in today's globalised and interconnected world.

But first let us just focus for a minute on the scene of the story. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous – it drops over 3,000 feet in little over 20 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho, running through a deep, twisting canyon with rocky sides. Such a road was perfect for highwaymen preying on innocent travellers – something that was still happening as late as the 1930s. So Jesus was telling of something that happened often on this stretch of road. Few Israelis today would travel from Jerusalem to Galilee by the direct route, because it would take them through the Palestinian territory of the West Bank and so risk violence. In the same way, most first-century pilgrims making the same journey would choose to travel east downhill from Jerusalem and then up the Jordan valley to Jericho. Perhaps the most surprising part of the story is that no less than four people should walk along this dangerous road alone in the same day – the man who was attacked, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan – when most people would have travelled in the relative safety of a convoy or caravan. But no doubt there were those who for one reason or another were forced to travel alone – sufficient to make the story plausible, because its main purpose, of course, is to answer the lawyer's question, 'And who is my neighbour?'.

It was a genuine question, for the Rabbis, with their passion for definition, sought to define who a man's neighbour was – at their worst they confined the word *neighbour* to their fellow Jews. For the lawyer, God is the God of Israel, and neighbours are Jewish neighbours: Jesus has accepted his summary of the law – loving God with all your heart, soul, strength and understanding – itself from Deuteronomy chapter 6 and echoed in today's reading – but the lawyer appears to want to come out on top in this public confrontation. His question 'And who is my neighbour?' is designed to smoke out Jesus' supposedly heretical views on God's wider plans for the whole world.

We don't have to look far for modern equivalents of the Rabbinic view of neighbours. I once discussed with a South African anthropologist friend the paradox of many white South Africans who were committed and practising Christians but who seemed readily to accept the nature of apartheid society. He replied with an insight drawn both from his personal faith and his anthropological discipline: such whites were Christians, he said, within *their own moral community.* Tradition and custom – their whole upbringing – had conspired

to place black South Africans outside that community, conferring acceptance of the way society worked, even the whole legal apparatus of apartheid. In the closing years of apartheid the Dutch Reformed churches in South Africa, which had supported apartheid, confessed this to be the heresy that it undoubtedly was.

South Africa is far from unique. Hungarians and Romanians treat the Romany or gypsy people as outside the community. China is notoriously repressive towards its ethnic minorities, especially the Uighur people, and the caste system in India causes untold suffering. The Buddhist majority in Burma seem unable even to accept the Muslim Rohingya minority as a legitimate part of their population. And the seeming indifference of many Israelis to the imprisoned and controlled lives of their Palestinian neighbours in Gaza and the West Bank appear to reflect a similar concept of a bounded moral community. Boundaries are not just lines on the ground: they are also mental and moral constructs which enable people to rationalise and justify discrimination and suffering.

The parable of the Good Samaritan addresses these situations with dramatic clarity. Mention of a Samaritan in the story would lead Jesus' listeners to expect nothing good. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans at all, but this man was clearly a regular visitor to the inn. He may not have been racially a Samaritan at all – the term was sometimes used to describe a man who was a heretic and a breaker of the ceremonial law, and Jesus himself was called a Samaritan by the Jews in chapter 8 of John's Gospel. So perhaps this man was a Samaritan in the sense of being a man whom orthodox people despised. Whichever sense Jesus intended, the message is clear: we must not draw any boundaries, social, moral or racial, around our neighbours.

Nor, ultimately, can we draw geographical boundaries. This poses all manner of dilemmas in the globalising world in which we live, and there are no easy answers – but at the least we must recognise the problem and struggle with the implications. Political boundaries are clearly an unavoidable necessity in our world where states perform essential functions. One of those functions is to control the movement of people, for security reasons and because states feel the need to limit the number and identity of their citizens. But in formulating migration policies, and in their treatment of asylum seekers and other would-be immigrants, the Christian concept of neighbourliness raises difficult questions. How can we reconcile this concept with many of the actions of our own Home Office? – first the 'hostile environment' and now threatened deportation to Rwanda? Why cannot the countries of the EU, which emphasise their Christian heritage, agree on a fair plan to share the perceived burden of asylum seekers? Is it reasonable to see Ukrainians as neighbours but not Afghans?

In 'One World Week' we accept the concept of a global community. This surely means more than learning how other people live, important as that is; it must mean thinking and acting about *how we live together* in the world we share. John Wesley famously declared that the world was his parish, long before modern transport and communications. In today's interconnected world we are inescapably bound together – not just by the annihilation of distance, but by problems that are have to be tackled globally: international crime and security, including cyber crime and cyber warfare, population growth and migration, trade and resources, and above all climate change and environment.

There is a sense in which we know *too much* about our world for our own comfort. Scarcely a day passes without report of some disaster, natural or man-made. Human conflicts and human suffering in remote places are made to seem close. Appeals for good

causes at home and abroad pour through our doors almost daily. And yet even all this news and information reflect a tiny fraction of the world's sufferings. Clearly we cannot begin to address them all, and the events of recent years have shown all too clearly the pitfalls of intervening in complex situations, even where we feel some sense of responsibility for problems which stem partially from our own colonial actions in past centuries. There is much that is controversial, much to argue about here, but one thing that emerges starkly is the *interconnectedness* of the world we live in. We are all neighbours in this sense: decisions we have made and which we make today do have implications for people and societies far away.

This all seems a world away from the apparent simplicities of the Good Samaritan in the ancient world. But those simplicities remain important, and at the very heart of our Christian faith. Christianity is fundamentally about human relationships, and that means about our relations within our neighbourhoods and the communities in which we live and work. There is an African proverb that translates as 'You are who you are through other people'. This is simple yet profound: not just at the practical levels of interdependence, but at the deeper human level of mental and spiritual well-being. What is ultimately at stake in the parable of the Good Samaritan is whether we will use God's revelation of love and grace as a way of boosting our own sense of isolated security and purity, as the Rabbis taught and the lawyer sought to do, or whether we see it as a call and challenge to extend that love and grace to a wider world. The perceived self-sufficiency and security that comes from living in an affluent society is an illusion which easily comes crashing down when things go wrong – a medical diagnosis, a financial disaster or a bereavement can transform our lives at any time. We need our neighbours as much as they need us, and they are indeed an essential part of our humanity.