

And who is my neighbour?

*A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon, Licensed Lay Minister
at St. Peter's, Wolvercote, 15th July 2007, 10.00a.m.*

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. 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.

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, which is close to the Dead Sea and actually below sea level. It was a road of narrow, rocky clefts and sudden turnings, 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. 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 genuine 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. We don't have to look far for modern equivalents.

Once when I was in Grahamstown, South Africa, I was discussing with an anthropologist friend the paradox of many white South Africans who were committed and practising Christians but who seemed to have so little difficulty accepting 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, giving a naturalness to the way society worked, even to the whole legal apparatus of apartheid, more recently recognised by the Dutch Reformed churches in South Africa as the heresy that it undoubtedly was. South Africa may be the most notorious example, but there are many others in the modern world. The Serbs certainly do not seem to have recognised the Albanian majority in Kosovo in any sense as neighbours. Hungarians and Romanians treat the Romany or gypsy people as outside the community. And how can the seeming indifference of many Israelis to the imprisoned and controlled lives of their Palestinian neighbours in Gaza and the West Bank be understood except in terms of some concept of moral community? Their boundaries are not just the land boundaries over which argument rages endlessly on, and which are controlled so rigidly on the ground: their boundaries are mental and moral constructs which enable them to rationalise and justify all the suffering that they inflict.

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, which raises the possibility that 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 – 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. 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 – clearly we can do no other in the interconnected world in which we live.

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. Every week I receive an email bulletin called Pambazuka News about events in the 45 or so countries of Africa. It consists of just the first few lines of many stories, with web links to the full story, drawn from a host of sources – yet the letter itself, these introductory sentences, runs to many more pages than I have time to read. Collectively it conveys something of the burden of human suffering, much of it unnecessary and man-made, in the world’s most troubled continent. There are also essays and comments from a radical perspective, many of them emphasising the links between the events and sufferings in Africa and decisions taken and policies followed by the world’s richer nations like our own. There is much that is controversial, much to argue about: but one thing that emerges starkly is the *interconnectedness* of the world we live in. We are all neighbours in this sense: decisions we make do have implications for people and societies far removed from us.

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. In our epistle today Paul begins his letter to the Colossians by addressing it to 'the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae'. In his earlier letters – to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians and the Galatians - he always addresses *the church* in these places. But from Romans onwards – in Colossians, Philippians and Ephesians – he addresses his letters to God's dedicated *people* in each place. Perhaps this signifies that as Paul grew older, he came increasingly to see that what matters is individual people, not the Church as an abstract entity. Christianity is fundamentally about human relationships, and that means about our relations within our neighbourhoods and the communities in which we live and work. You may well know the African proverb that translates as 'You are who you are through other people'. How very wise! – not just at the practical levels of interdependence, but at the deeper human level of mental and spiritual well-being. Technological superiority gives us a sense of being in control, but how many of us begin to understand most of the technologies we use? Technological progress merely underlines our interdependence in new ways. 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. We need our neighbours as much as they need us, and they are indeed an essential part of our humanity.