

The Lessons of the Good Samaritan

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Dr Rob Gilbert* on the 14th July, at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 8.00am.

Deuteronomy, ch. 30, vv. 9-14 and Luke, ch. 10, vv. 25-37.

This morning's readings directly contrast the theoretical and the practical in life and in faith. Both the reading from Deuteronomy and the reading from Luke's Gospel present big ideas, big concepts and abstract aims and also basic, simple truths and practical outcomes. They contrast the two and they both argue that the practical is more to the point than the theoretical, that the everyday is more significant than the epic.

In the Deuteronomy reading, Moses is coming to the end of his giving of the law, which has been the whole subject matter of the book. But at the end, having prescribed in minute detail everything that ought to be done and a lot that ought not to be done, he says that the whole Law is just about turning to God with all your heart and all your soul. He says, the commandments aren't so hard – not in heaven, or over the sea, they do not require going to the ends of the earth. Instead, the commandment is in every person's mouth and in their heart. The demands of the Law are nearby, to hand, and everyday – you could say, they are lying about.

Lying about like the injured traveller in the story of the Good Samaritan. The story of this man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by bandits is told in answer to a lawyer who asked for the key to eternal life. This lawyer – with money to spare and intelligence to ask the right questions – was expecting a big, legal answer, the kind of thing that might involve (figuratively speaking) going up to heaven or over the sea. That might involve going to the ends of the earth, looking for the neighbour he had to love in order to be justified. Instead he got a simple answer – that the way to inherit eternal life was lying by the side of the road, in the form of the neighbour who needed his help, this traveller going down to Jericho from Jerusalem.

We should notice the characters in the story of the Good Samaritan who do not have time for the man lying by the side of the road, who do not notice their neighbour lying there. They are a priest and a Levite – that is, a lawyer. So Jesus is caricaturing the legal attitude that saw in the Law a massive and complex code of do's and don'ts, a complex network of prohibitions and instructions in which you can get enmeshed. He's using a memorable story to remind the lawyer who asked him the question what Moses himself said about the Law, that in the end it is in your mouth and in your heart. The demands of the Law are everyday, they are lying about. Jesus uses this story to caricature the Law while speaking to a lawyer. We read the story in church, because it has a religious significance, but it also caricatures the priest. The priest in the story is so busy, so tied up with big ideas and complex ritual, so intent on getting to the Temple, that he also does not see the man lying by the side of the road. The priest was someone whose role was to help people ensure they obeyed the Law, to provide means for making atonement with God, to enable people to receive absolution. But the way to obey the Law, in this case, was to stop and help the man lying by the side of the road, the neighbour who needed help but got ignored.

The fact I am a priest means I must believe that what priests have to offer by way of service matters – including pronouncing absolution and enabling the communion of people with God. But this story reminds us that the work of a priest is as much about noticing the demands of

God's Law lying about, like the man by the side of the Jericho road, as they are about trying to understand and interpret the concepts we use to help us in our faith. The work of every follower of Jesus is as much about being ready to see the practical demands of the neighbour we are called to love and serve as it is about understanding the sense in which Christ is present in our neighbour – whoever that is.

Let's be practical. In our church I think this might mean taking issues of justice and the practical experience of what is graceful and good more importantly than ethical and traditional theory. That point can be applied to any number of issues, but since the General Synod has just met I will say that we could apply it to the ministry of women in the church and what a good that has been found to be. Given some other stories in the news I will also say that we could apply this lesson to our thinking about human relationships and the beginning and the end of life. You notice I'm not saying *how* we should apply the lessons of the Good Samaritan, just that we should try to! You will each see it in different ways.

To close I'm going to contrast the story of the Good Samaritan with a very different story indeed, but one in which the same point is made that I have been trying to emphasise. It's the book *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. At the centre of the book are the characters of Edward Casaubon and Dorothea Brooke. Casaubon is a clergyman and squire – a kind of priest and Levite in one – thought to be writing a book called *The Key to All Mythologies*. He will never complete his project, which detaches him from everyday life and the demands of his neighbour, including Dorothea whom he marries. She admires him at first but quickly comes to see the irrelevance of Casaubon devoting his life to his doomed project. Dorothea's focus is instead on meeting the needs of the poor, on the sick lying in their cottages and the children who need schooling, the hungry who need feeding. The book ends like this, speaking at its close of Dorothea herself:

“the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Like Dorothea Brooke and the Good Samaritan.

Amen.