

10 July 2016. Luke 10:25-37 and Colossians 1:1-14

Why on earth does it matter who my neighbour is? And why is the answer so challenging?

It matters because it points out that the law of love is about action, it's not a concept or a feeling. It matters because it's about the kingdom of God being here and now. It matters because it shows us that we are incapable of completing so perfect a love. It is challenging because it's not about being nice to those we know and like. It's challenging because it requires us to do something which will cost us. It's challenging because we can't earn salvation, we have to accept God's grace and the sacrifice of Jesus.

Last winter I found myself being tested and was very glad when someone else stepped out and responded whilst I was still weighing up the pros and cons of doing anything. One evening on my way home from work, I was waiting for the bus at the bottom of Park Street. It's a busy spot with masses of people and traffic milling around. I became aware that someone, not a rough sleeper, was slumped in a doorway across the road. It then started to rain very heavily. And that person didn't make a move to find shelter. I carried on watching whilst beginning to think that something was wrong and should I investigate. But I was tired, my bus was due and I had promised to visit someone once I got home. The woman standing next to me had also noticed the person still slumped motionless. She asked me if I thought we should do something, and another person chimed in trying to work out if there was a number they could ring. And my bus came, and I got on it. The woman who had spoken to me didn't. She stayed to see what was wrong with that person. I felt guilty, but I stayed on the bus. I can justify my decision in all sorts of ways, but I acted to protect myself.

Why was it so easy to walk away? What if no else had seen what I had seen, would I have acted then? If it happens again what will I do?

It's so easy to glibly say that my neighbour is everyone and do nothing much about it. It also easy to convert this parable into just a gospel for social action, a call to compassion and humanitarian aid.

Early Christianity made a case for the Samaritan being a symbol for Jesus. The man attacked on the road being Adam (or human kind) and his wounds our sin. Jerusalem represents paradise and Jericho the world. So Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden or paradise and go out into the world. The robbers represent the powers of evil, and the priest and the levite represent the law and the prophets. The Samaritan is Jesus. Oil and wine, his blood. Jesus rescues us. The Inn represents the Church – as place of welcome and the promise to return being the promise of Christ's second coming. I first came across this interpretation in Chartres Cathedral, with its glorious medieval stained glass. The one known as the Good Samaritan window has Adam and Eve leaving the garden of Eden in the top half, with the parable at the bottom, linked by Jesus.

Whether that is too allegorical for some of you, I don't know. But I find it helps. It somehow gives me an understanding of the practical care Jesus wants to give me, and wants to use me to do the same. It brings together the concept of salvation with my intellectual

understanding that the kingdom of God is here and now. It shows me that I am part of the work in bringing in the kingdom and if Jesus has been the Good Samaritan to me – to all of us who believe and trust in him, then I will be to want to be a Good Samaritan to others.

Paul's opening words in the letter to the Colossians, picks up on the thing that is remarkable about this community of worshippers. He doesn't say anything about their holiness, their learning and wisdom, instead he sees a telltale sign of new life – they are showing signs of love in the spirit. And that doesn't mean that they simply have developed good feelings for each other. What their community is showing (the fruit of the community if you like) is something other than what is often seen in communities. Lust, anger, lies, personal ambition, the things that split communities are being replaced by kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, despite their differences of race, background and culture. Paul sees that as evidence of God at work. And note, the word forgiveness. That implies that this community, like every community, has differences of opinion, the potential for conflict. Conflict can be a healthy thing, but to be so, a community needs to have respect for each other, to practice gentleness, kindness and so on, so that conflict doesn't destroy, but strengthens.

Mark has asked for our prayers for General Synod as they have their shared conversations about Human Sexuality over the next few days. If we think of Paul's words about the fruit that the churches in Colossae were showing, we can pray that the deliberations, conversations and interactions at Synod and the reporting of them would be marked by a spirit of love, not a spirit of fear or anger.

The question asked by the lawyer – who then is my neighbour – is answered with a mighty challenge that demands us to accept, to embrace God's wide reaching grace. It requires us to respond to the needs of others. It doesn't ask us to be over religious, to be perpetually busy, to be incessantly looking for good works to do. Someone's need might be that they need to be listened to, to be given time and company. Somehow we often see that sort of response as one of being rather than doing. But I think that when we slow down, when we just are who we are, then we give others the space to be, to share, maybe to ask question, then we are acting in the spirit of love.

So, what will we do with God's love and grace. Will we use it to boost a sense of isolated security and purity or will we see it as an opportunity to extend that love and grace into the world?

Sarah Thomas 10 July 2016