

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Luke 10:25–37

If you had to say which was the best known parable of Jesus I think it would be a choice between The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan. Today we're looking at the very familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

It's a great temptation to treat it as an allegory. An allegory is where every detail has a different meaning to the obvious one. So Jerusalem is earth and Jericho is heaven. The traveller is an unsaved sinner and the bandits are the devil and all his demons. The Priest and the Levite are Judaism without Christ and the Good Samaritan is – of course, Jesus. This is where it gets increasingly fanciful.

When you start giving a special meaning to the bandages, the oil and wine, the donkey, the innkeeper, the inn, and the two silver coins, it becomes ridiculous, though that hasn't stopped some sincere preachers from trying it. The strongest argument against this type of interpretation is that it would never have occurred to the people who first heard the story.

This is not an allegory. It is a parable. It has one central meaning and the details are there to make that meaning clear and to make the story live.

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. It was a very public event. 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said, in effect, 'What do you think? You're the legal expert. What does the Law say?' The expert then quoted two Old Testament texts, Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 5 and Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18, combining the twin requirements to love God and to love your neighbour. Jesus said, 'That's right. Do that and you will live.'

The 'test' turned out to be a non-event and the expert ran the risk of looking rather silly for asking such a simple question. Luke says he wanted to justify himself. He didn't want to appear silly. So he asked another question. 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus answered by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The unfortunate victim in the story was a Jew. You might have expected that the priest and the Levite would have helped him since they were also Jews. But they were no doubt travelling in the opposite direction, not from Jerusalem but to Jerusalem where they would have important religious duties to do in the temple. If they stopped to help the man they would make themselves ritually unclean and would be unable to perform those duties and so they were in a quandary. It was a dilemma. They had a difficult choice and they opted to keep themselves ritually pure. They opted not to risk being contaminated with blood or even possibly death.

The priest and the Levite passed by on the other side and the travelling Jew remained by the roadside, stripped, robbed, bleeding and half dead. But then the unexpected happened. A Samaritan happened to be travelling that way, came upon the Jew, took pity on him and stopped to help him. It was just as well that the Jew was half dead. If he had been alive and well and the Samaritan had offered him so much as a glass of water he would have been outraged. He would have refused it and shoved the man away.

The point is that the Samaritan was the last person you would expect to offer help to a Jew. However, he not only offered help, he went well beyond the bounds of what might have been expected, even with a stretch of the imagination. He took pity on him. He bandaged his wounds. He poured on oil and wine. He put the man on his own donkey. He took him to an inn. He looked after him. He stayed with him overnight. Next day he took out the equivalent of about £300 and gave it to the innkeeper. He then promised to return and reimburse any additional expenses. That was exceptional behaviour.

If you want a more typical illustration of normal relations between Jews and Samaritans you just have to look back to chapter 9 verse 51. This is a major turning point in Luke's Gospel. It tells us that Jesus was on a journey. It had a destination and it had a detour. The destination was heaven. 'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven...'. The detour was Jerusalem. 'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.'

Heaven was where he belonged. Heaven was the reward for a perfect life lived without sin. Jesus had the right to go straight to heaven but instead he set his face to go to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was where he would be rejected, betrayed, denied, condemned and crucified. The cross was the last thing Jesus deserved but he went willingly to that cross to lay down his perfect life. He offered his perfect life as a sacrifice for our sins.

Luke chapter 9 verse 51 is in some ways the key verse in the Gospel. It was high time to be taken up to heaven but instead he set his face towards Jerusalem.

That journey would take him through Samaria and the following verses tell us that he sent messengers on ahead. They went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.'

That illustrates the normal attitude of a Samaritan towards a Jew. There was a deep prejudice. They simply didn't want to know. Interestingly, the very next verse (54) records a typical Jewish reaction to this Samaritan prejudice. 'When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"' They were no doubt thinking of Sodom and Gomorrah and the fire that rained down from heaven on those wicked cities.

Verses 55, 56: 'But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.' Jesus seems very laid back about the reaction of the Samaritans. Later he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Is he saying that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you do loving things? That's the interpretation which some people put on the parable.

Let's keep moving through this journey of Jesus. In chapter 10 he sent out 72 followers to go to every town and place where he was about to go. Listen to what he said to them in verses 8 to 12. 'When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near." I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.'

It *does* matter how you respond to the message of Jesus. But notice that Jesus doesn't say, 'Call down fire from heaven on them.' What he does say is that they will face God's judgment on the last day.

Years later the Samaritan village that refused to welcome Jesus would have another chance after the death and resurrection of Jesus, after he had ascended to heaven, after the Holy Spirit had come. In Acts chapter 8 we read of evangelistic missions to Samaria. Verse 25 says, 'Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.' It would not surprise me if John made a point of returning to that very village where he had wanted to call down fire from heaven. He knew more of the grace of God in Christ by now.

That's really what the parable of the Good Samaritan is all about: God's grace in Christ. In the story the Samaritan overcame prejudice and animosity and took pity on a fellow human being. He went far beyond the man's minimum needs and went out of his way to show maximum kindness and compassion. That's what grace is all about. That's what loving your neighbour means.

Commentators have pointed out that Jesus did not give a direct answer to the question the legal expert put to him, 'Who is my neighbour?' Jesus didn't say, 'This one or that

one is your neighbour.' He said, in effect, What does it mean to *be* a good neighbour?' Jesus said, 'Which of the three, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan was a neighbour to the man who had been mugged?' The answer was obvious. 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus said, 'Go and do likewise.'

The punch line was this. You're asking the wrong question. Not, who is my neighbour? but what kind of neighbour am I?

Drawing together the lessons of this parable, we see that it is never our place to take revenge. There will be a day of judgment when God will call to account all those who have rebelled or refused him, all who have committed atrocities. If Slobodan Milosevic was guilty of crimes against humanity his death has not denied the world of justice. He still has to face God, and he will. Every one of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

This is still the day of God's mercy and grace. The Samaritan village that refused to receive Christ was not punished with fire from heaven. It was given a second chance under the ministry of the apostles. We don't know the outcome but we do know that God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

We see what being a good neighbour is all about: overcoming prejudice and pride and meeting the need of our fellow human beings.

But most of all we see a reflection of the greatest demonstration of grace. As one commentator has put it, 'If this is how Christ taught us to love our neighbour as ourselves, how well did he practise what he preached? ... We and all mankind were under the power of the enemy. In that sorry plight we had no claim on the Father's pre-incarnate Son: we were not his neighbours nor he ours. But he chose by incarnation to come where we were; and in spite of the fact that human beings hounded him to a cross, he rescued us at his own expense, and has paid in advance the cost of completing our redemption and of perfecting us for unimaginable glory. What is more, when he comes again he will reimburse magnificently all who, like the seventy, the apostles and the disciples, have in any way helped him in his task.'