

Sermon 13 July 2025 The Good Samaritan

Hebrews 13:13-15, 20-21 Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan has to be one of the greatest short stories ever told. On the face of it, it has a very simple message – it is our duty to care for anyone in need, no matter whom they might be. But at the same time, as with so many of the stories told by Jesus, it has many layers containing a variety of messages. It would take more than a fifteen minute sermon to do justice to all these layers, so I will look at just a few.

Firstly, let's look at the scene. A traveller was making his way from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was set upon by a band of robbers, beaten, robbed and left for dead. This particular stretch of road was notoriously dangerous. It was very windy, so you didn't have a clear view of the road ahead, and in addition, large rocks were dotted along the roadside and so provided ideal hiding places for those who had villainous intentions. We have to ask ourselves what this man, and indeed all the participants in this story, were doing travelling down this road on their own, but let's not spoil the story. The point is, they were.

So this man is left there, to all intents and purposes dead and along comes a priest. The priest carefully avoids him by crossing on to the other side of the road and moving on. There is probably a reason why he did this, whether it is a good one or not is, of course, highly debatable. Priests served in the Temple in Jerusalem and many of them lived in Jericho. As stated in Numbers 19:11, touching a dead person would make them ceremoniously unclean for seven days: *'And all those who touch a dead human body will be ceremoniously unclean for seven days.'* This would entail him returning to Jerusalem and undergoing a rigorous cleansing ritual. So he was playing it safe by avoiding him completely.

The next person who comes along is a Levite. The Levites assisted the priests in the Temple. The law with regards touching a dead person would not have strictly applied to him but there is certainly a sense of guilt by association, so to speak. However, there is another possible issue here. Bandits often used someone as a decoy and this could well have played on his mind, and so he gave the body a wide berth.

I can't help feeling that Jesus was, once again, having a dig at the Pharisees here. Jesus often criticised the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a religious party who had huge influence. They controlled the synagogues and they believed that the way to God was through obeying the law. This is what Jesus took issue with. *'You Pharisees crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.'* Matthew 23:4. He said they had it all wrong, that God was not interested in rituals and regulations, that the way to God was through love. The actions of the priest and the Levite were all about observing ritual rather than extending a little TLC to the poor victim.

I do wonder if two thousand years later we have really understood this message from Jesus. When I look at various domains of our worldwide church, I see, in some instances, an attention to ritual and regulations, making sure things are carried out in a certain prescribed way that really goes against what Jesus stood for. Dale alluded to this last Sunday. This actually upset Jesus.

Read Matthew 23 and you will see what I mean. For almost the whole chapter Jesus harangues and harshly criticises the Pharisees for professing to be so very religious but actually ignoring the essence of what it means to practise that religiosity – to put it simply – to love your neighbour. He accuses them of hypocrisy: *'Outwardly you look like righteous people but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy.'* Matthew 23:28. He certainly pulls no punches: *'Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell?'* Matthew 23:33. I have no doubt that he has the Pharisees in mind when he relates the role of the priest and the Levite in our story. And, of course, there is a message in there for us all.

Which brings us to the man of the moment, the Samaritan. To understand the full ramification of this story, we need to understand the relationship between Jews and the Samaritans. To put it simply, the Samaritans were enemies of the Jews, and remember the victim was Jewish. The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans was deeply entrenched. This story is called the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but to first-century Jews there was no such thing. One notable Rabbi went so far as to

label Samaritans 'degenerate.' And the feeling was mutual. For their part, the Samaritans returned the hostility in good measure.

So we can see just what a powerful and revolutionary point Jesus is making. Remember Jesus is telling the story in response to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' Now to the Jewish man of that time, their neighbour would be restricted to their fellow Jew and certainly would not include a Gentile (non-Jew). Some Rabbis went so far as to say that it was illegal to assist a Gentile woman at childbirth because that was just bringing another Gentile into the world!

But Jesus is giving a whole new perspective on just who our neighbour is, and just as importantly, how we should treat that neighbour. Bottom line, we care for anyone and everyone, no matter what our relationship might be with them. This parable is a perfect illustration of the point we have made on more than one occasion – Jesus' commandment to love your neighbour carries no qualification, no exception, no judgment.

This was all very revolutionary, but then that was Jesus. He gave the norms and the standards of the day a real shake-up, to the point where what was not the norm then, has become the acceptable and even the preferred today. This is just another example of the pervading influence Jesus has had on the way we perceive and understand things today.

Just take the word 'Samaritan.' In Jesus' time it was a word that conjured up very negative feelings. Today the word 'Samaritan' has the exact opposite effect, and that is purely because of this story Jesus told. It really is quite amazing and speaks volumes about the influence this man Jesus had.

I want to finish by making this point. As well as the question as to who constitutes one's neighbour, this parable also addresses the question as to what constitutes love as prescribed by Jesus. The answer is that love is not so much an emotional feeling but rather a gesture that often entails a degree of sacrifice. The Samaritan not only put himself at some risk by his actions, but he also put the victim up at an inn and promised to return and remunerate the inn keeper if there was a shortfall. This really does lie at the heart of Christian love. The love is embodied in the sacrifice. The two are inextricably entwined.

There is the story of the Irish explorer, Ernest Shackleton, who in 1908 headed an Antarctic expedition attempting to reach the South Pole. They came closer than anyone had before, but 97 miles short of the Pole, they had to turn back. In his diary, Shackleton told of the time when their food supplies were exhausted save for one last ration of hardtack, a dried sort of biscuit, that was distributed to each man. Some stowed the hardtack in their food sacks, saving it for a last moment of hungry desperation.

That night Shackleton was almost asleep when he noticed one of his most trusted men sitting up in his sleeping bag and looking about to see if anyone was watching. His heart sank as he watched him reach over to the food sack of the man sleeping next to him. Shackleton watched as the man then took his own hardtack biscuit and placed it in the other man's sack. Now that is sacrifice.

Mother Teresa said, *'If you really love one another, you will not be able to avoid making sacrifices.'* I quote from our first reading: *'And don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are sacrifices that please God.'* Hebrews 13:15.

The Good Samaritan shows us the way. Not only does he exemplify the essence of love in the Christian sense, but he reaches across barriers of culture, belief and bad blood in order to do so. That, my friends, is the challenge for not just us as people, but also as a church. As Dale said last Sunday, *'The main thing for the church is to be the presence of Jesus in our community.'* And as Rev Bruce Richardson said the Sunday before, that calls for a commitment from you and me. In the end, we are the church. Amen.