

The Parable of the good innkeeper!

Deuteronomy 30: 9-16 and Luke 10: 25-37

I have met people who have such little love for themselves that they want to die yet at the beginning of the gospel reading loving your neighbour as you love yourself is the answer to life. Some people are so angry with life that they will hurt others who they love with the things they do or say and cause a lot of pain. If you don't love yourself it is hard to love others as Jesus commands us to do so the first mission of the Church is to help people love themselves....

The question being asked in the gospel today is "what we must do to inherit eternal life?" and the answer is not simply to have faith in God, but "to love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself."

Faith alone is not enough. It is not enough to say "we love you God" unless we display that love for everyone to see and feel. We have a responsibility to share that love with our neighbours, whoever they may be! To inherit eternal life is in our hands. It is NOT something guaranteed because we have faith in God that we will be saved, as many believe, but God tells us how to save ourselves. We have the choice to live or die.

I know there are some wise theologians among us so let me just ask if we are tuned in to the same wavelength: My question is what I must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus asks how I understand scripture and then affirms my answer: "To love God and love my neighbour as myself." I have got to do something for my neighbour if I want a share of this inheritance.

This is not some sort of romantic love that runs dry after a few years, or months or even days, but is a love which is as eternal as life because it is from the heart of God. The best summaries are from John 13:34 which were the words we sang as a text for the message and in John 15: 12 where Jesus says: "My command is this. Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

The Church is so busy trying to save her life that she is dying in the process, but when she is prepared to sacrifice her life for Jesus she will live. (Matthew 10: 39) We have the choice of life or death and what God commands is not too difficult to do or beyond our reach because the words are in our mouths and on our hearts for us to trust and obey. (Deuteronomy 30: 11-14)

However simple an answer might be; however obvious a job to be done, we want to justify how we do things and so question follows question as we try to establish our boundaries and who might be excluded from receiving our love. The question is not really "who is my neighbour?" but "who should I love." We think there must be boundaries or borders to justify excluding people. There must be social and cultural identities that unite us in love or differences which separate us from it so who is my neighbour in what have become such diverse communities?

Jesus then tells a parable in answer to the question and our understanding of neighbours becomes more than the family next door or the old woman across the street. Our neighbours are not just in a local community but in God's global family!

God loves the children He created equal in the beginning and wants us — no, commands us — to love each other as brothers and sisters. It's a love which is prepared to lay down lives for our family. Is that radical love or just real love? It's not a love of convenience which we divorce ourselves from when the going gets too tough, but a love of commitment which trusts and obeys whatever the risk. Our love is to extend even to our enemies and those who persecute us (Matthew 5: 44) which doesn't leave much escape from the command does it?

Having listened to the parable Jesus asks another question and as soon as I answer I know how different I am from the one who shows mercy — or is it how different he is to me? He's not like a priest consumed by concerns for his congregation rather than the community or like the Levite who must consider his reputation and how it might impact on his business interests.

I've got to be everywhere on time while he just travels in God's time. He sees what I don't see and hears what I don't hear so has a stillness of heart and mind which is in tune with God. I'm listening for the ring of

my mobile, he's listening to the sounds of life. I'm rushing to selfishly meet deadlines, but he's patiently trying to connect people to lifelines! Jesus identifies himself as the Samaritan who takes time to stop for the wounded, looks after them, takes them to a safe place and promises to come back and reimburse the people who help him. Jesus is the one who has mercy and we are told to follow his example and do the same. To trust him and obey what he says.

Jesus loves his neighbours as he loves himself because the heart of God lives within him and he has heard that voice from heaven saying: "This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3: 17) He trusts and obeys because there is no other way than the will of the Father if the Kingdom of justice and peace is to come. If only we can learn to love as Jesus loves then the wounded people of our roadsides will not feel as though the world is passing them by. They will see the love of God in action.

So many people in the world today feel as though they are victims of injustices which rob them of all they have, strip them of their dignity and leave them for dead. The parable raises the question of how we respond to those injustices and whether we mirror the priest and Levite or reflect the image of Samaritan and Innkeeper?

I believe in the priesthood of all believers but am concerned that we are producing priests so wrapped up in the tradition of the church that we are neglecting the people who believe love has passed them by. I understand the importance of the Church to the very fabric of a community but worry that we are distracted from what God wants of us by other priorities. The Priest and the Levite represent what God does not want from religion, but the Samaritan and the Innkeeper express the loving relationship that can bring healing to the world.

Jesus is the Samaritan and the Innkeeper represents a neighbour to whom he brings the wounded people he stops to care for. I want to be part of a Church that will be that good neighbour, a special friend who will trust in Jesus and obey that command to love as he loves.

I am sure most of us have felt like a victim of injustice at some time — and maybe some still do — and when that happens we don't love ourselves very much so the love we share isn't of the best quality either. Loving people as we love ourselves if we are depressed by our circumstances can cause hurt rather than healing so Jesus finds us where we are and takes us to a place of rest and renewal.

This is a parable that speaks to the victim as well because the command to love crosses all boundaries of race, faith and culture with something to receive as well as give. Love is a two-way relationship so be loved as you would want to be loved regardless of who is caring for you.

The one who sees you in your time of greatest need, stops in an intimidating environment to help you and takes you to a safe place where he pays for you to be cared for isn't the familiar face of a priest or someone with authority in your community, but is an outsider, a stranger who is risking his life for you. If you feel like a victim of injustice know something else as well: Jesus sees you as someone worth stopping for so why not be loved back to life!

I wonder how many doors the Samaritan had to knock on before a compassionate Innkeeper welcomed him and his wounded stranger. It reminds me of the Nativity story in which we imagine Mary and Joseph being turned away because there is no room at any of the inns until one kindly innkeeper offers the only space he has, a place in a stable.

When Jesus comes to our door with a stranger and then asks us to look after someone who needs a lot of costly 'TLC' what is our response, not only as individuals but as a Church? It is Jesus who has done the work of the Samaritan and comes asking us to be good neighbours who will help him with the healing process, but how many individuals, how many churches, have reasons for not helping?

We know the parable of the Good Samaritan so well and we don't want to be like Priest or Levite who walk by on the other side of the road, but I wonder whether we are like the expert lawyer who wants to justify his actions. Yes, we know that Jesus has mercy on the victims and asks us to go and do likewise but is our door the right door for him to come knocking on?

It's all very well for him to promise to come back and reimburse us for the costs of the mission and ministry, but we need the money now. We don't have the resources to look after the victims who have been left half dead so we close our door and Jesus finds another place for them to find the healing love of God....

The ministry of the Church is to help people love themselves as Jesus loves them because they will then have a love to share which will change our city, our communities, into a kingdom of good neighbours. The inns were full when Jesus needed a place to be born, but someone opened a door and offered the only space they had at the time so good innkeepers can help love come to life!

So this is the parable of the Good Innkeeper and I want to be part of a Church which is a neighbour with an open door when the Samaritan calls asking for help for people who need healing. Is our Church a Good Innkeeper helping Jesus when he brings the wounded victims to our door?