

Luke 10:25—37 The Compassionate Samaritan

Preaching about the good Samaritan can feel like a poisoned chalice — this is one of the best known parables. Of course you know it, so what on earth can I say? It's too familiar. I've heard of various ways people have used to dress it up and make it fresh and engaging, to provoke thought.

We don't live in a land with a prejudice against Samaritans. But we do against illegal immigrants. Imagine if the man who has been robbed is overlooked first by the churchwarden, then by the rector, but helped by an illegal immigrant? What about a tramp? What about the compassionate one working at Sizewell C? Is anyone in those categories someone we would write off, and be shocked to think of them showing compassion where our compassion might fail?

I heard about the speaker at a Christian conference dressing up as a tramp and sitting outside the conference centre, demonstrably having health problems, while all the attendees filed past, not wanting to be late for a conference on how to be good! Imagine when he came in and revealed himself!

That story helpfully illustrates the conflicts of interest that we might feel between different varieties of 'good'. It is not good to be late. But is tardiness as bad as lacking compassion? The excuse for why the priest and the Levite might avoid the injured man (quite apart from fear that the robbers might be nearby, or because they were in a hurry) is that they had Levitical laws about ritual cleanliness. What if he were dead? Touching a dead body makes them ritually unclean. Now, this was a scriptural injunction to them — a law put in place in the law of Moses to indicate how significantly priests were to be set apart, how different their role was to other roles in society. And yet in the story Jesus tells this has become a significant reason for them not get their hands dirty with *actual compassion*. Goodness is never quite as easy as it sounds. The parable of the compassionate Samaritan is a well-aimed mortar strike at the religious practice of first century Judaism. It should be apparent what goodness is, and that God's people should be good. But our judgement is all too easily clouded.

One of the problems we might have is the belief that someone else is better qualified. If I haven't been first-aid trained, I think I shouldn't help, because someone else is bound to have first aid training. But if I've had first aid training perhaps I think someone else is a doctor or nurse, and I wasn't very good at first aid anyway?! What if I do something wrong?! It's so easy to think of reasons why it shouldn't be my problem, isn't it?

I suspect that another problem with this parable is that it has trained us to look out for beaten up strangers on the path from Jerusalem to Jericho. Happily, I don't often walk on that road, so I'm exempt, right?

The original question that provokes this parable is 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' The answer that the parable gives is 'act with compassion'. The in-between question (Who is my neighbour?) is almost an irrelevance. 'Who is my neighbour?' is another way of saying 'there's got to be limits, right?'

Something very like that was minor news a few months ago. In late January JD Vance the US vice president opined about 'The old school Christian teaching' which he later identified as 'ordo amoris' (or order of love), in which (and I quote): "You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then after that you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world". First Rory Stewart waded into rebut him on twitter/x, before the late Pope Francis effectively told him off in an open letter to the US government. Rory and the Pope were very much in agreement — Jesus's teaching in this story of the compassionate Samaritan is precisely that there *shouldn't be* concentric circles of love, moving from family to friends to community to country to the rest of the world. Jesus wants us to love and to have compassion. Full stop. If there is any prioritisation at all it is to prioritise those who are most at need. To extrapolate to absurdity — I can't give £10 each to a wealthy friend and to a homeless person. That kind of 'fair' is nonsense. The value of

money, or time, or love or anything else that you might give is entirely dependent on the situation of the person who receives that generosity or compassion.

Again — the reason monks and nuns are ‘brother’ or ‘sister’, and why many Christians talk to each other as brother or sister is because Jesus and the apostles urge us to treat each other with the love we would show our closest kin.

There are two dangers with how we take this understanding of the parable and apply it to our lives, and the answer in each case is prayer. Firstly, there is the danger that we understand the principle of the parable with crystal clarity, but in real life we fail to see that moment and embrace it. And I think the answer is to pray, every day, that God would widen our hearts, that we might love as he loves, and that we might think with compassion, speak with compassion and act with compassion.

The alternative danger may be that we are so transformed by embracing God’s compassion that we need to leap into every situation. This does happen, and it can become a sort of ‘messiah complex’. But the answer, I think, is prayer. Prayer that among competing priorities God would show us and guide us when and where and how to act. ‘Love your neighbour’ *is* universal — everyone is our neighbour — but you personally cannot save everyone. You can, however help one person at a time, according to your strength and ability, according to God’s direction, according to how the Holy Spirit enables you. After that, trust that God has other servants who can also help as you do.

There — you see, the compassionate Samaritan isn’t news to us. But it doesn’t need to be: it just needs to be a reminder of our calling as followers of Christ, that we are not to allow our compassion to collapse down, but constantly to push the bounds of our compassion outwards, that we may care for strangers, for the most needy, for the person who needs our help in that moment, in the way that the Samaritan of the story does, and the way that Jesus does.

Amen.