

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL, DUNEDIN
15th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
JULY 14, 2019

Amos 7:7-17
Psalm 82
Colossians 1:1-14
LUKE 10:25-37

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

A lawyer stands up to test Jesus, and asks, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And, having been persuaded by Jesus to answer this question for himself, he finds the answer in the two commands, to love God, and to love one's neighbour, on which hang all the Law and the Prophets. Still not satisfied, he presses Jesus further, and asks, "Who, then, is my neighbour?"

There can be little doubt that Luke is portraying this lawyer in a negative light. We are not meant to sympathise with him. He stands up to "test" Jesus, which means that he is doing exactly what Satan did after Jesus was driven into the wilderness. Like Satan, he is playing games with Scripture, to try and catch Jesus out. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, lawyers are a sort of foil for Jesus. They are usually his opponents. By refusing to be baptised by John the Baptist, the "Pharisees and lawyers ... rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Luke 7:30). Jesus condemns them for loading people with burdens hard to bear, without lifting a finger to ease them (Luke 11:46). They have built the tombs of the prophets their ancestors killed (Luke 11:47), and they have taken away the key of knowledge, standing in the way of those who sought to enter (Luke 11:52). Like the Pharisees, they do not answer Jesus when he asks them whether it lawful to cure a sick person on the Sabbath, or not.

It is easy, then, to see the lawyer's questions as proving that while he may be very learned in the Law, he does not really grasp its deeper meaning. He knows neither the love nor the justice of God. When he asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, then, he clearly does not understand the deeper meaning of the Law. The commandments are not there to bind God to do what we want. Eternal life in union with God cannot be bought in return for obedience, as if the commandments were a sort of currency that could be used to buy spiritual goods. That the lawyer does not understand this is an illustration of the fact that his learning is spiritually empty. He is only prepared to love God and his neighbour if he can be assured of eternal life, not for their own sake. And the fact that he has to ask Jesus who his neighbour is shows that he knows neither what it means to act as a neighbour towards others, nor who his neighbour is in the first place. His profound knowledge of the Law is spiritually empty.

It is tempting to respond in this way to the characters in the Gospel, because in a complex world it is easier to keep things simple than to recognise that, in fact, most of us are morally much more difficult to pin down than this. We understand ourselves poorly, and other people

even less, and few of us have the spiritual insight for which Paul prays in the Letter to the Colossians, that set the prophets and apostles apart, and that so clearly shines through the writings of the Desert Fathers and, say, the witness of the Elders (*starsi*) of the Russian Orthodox tradition. We are left to work out our salvation, with fear and trembling, in a world filled with distractions that dilute our spiritual discipline and make our senses dull to the truth of things, in our own souls and in the souls of others.

This is not the only place in the Gospel of Luke where someone asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. A little later on a certain ruler, who is very rich, comes to Jesus with the same question. When Jesus recites the commandments to him, eternal life seems within reach, because he has fulfilled these commandments to the letter. But there is something deeper he has failed to see. He must give up what he owns and share what he has with the poor. This is too much for him. He has stored up treasure for himself on earth, rather than with God in heaven. That is the deeper meaning of the Law.

When Mark tells this story, he says that Jesus looked at the man and loved him. Luke, for some reason, spares us this detail, and in the same way in this story (Luke 10:25-37) we are told nothing either about what the lawyer felt when he spoke to Jesus, or what lay behind his questions, or what Jesus felt before he answered him. Perhaps it does not matter, and there is nothing more to be said. Or perhaps Jesus draws him on because he can see that there is, in fact, a deep struggle going on in the lawyer's soul. He knows the commandments, and he lives them, but there is a deep spiritual emptiness, a restlessness that he somehow cannot shake off, and cannot resolve. So he asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

So there may be more to this lawyer's question than meets the eye. In the same way, it is not a foolish, or impious, question to ask who my neighbour is. After all, it is almost meaningless to say that *everyone* is my neighbour. Such is the waywardness of the human heart that it is easy to love everyone in the abstract, but how terribly difficult it is to love the person you are called to love now, in this moment. That is understandable if that person has done me an appalling wrong, for whom a lifetime does not seem long enough to find a way to forgive and be healed. But it is no less the case that, unless we are unusually blessed, we can find it intolerably difficult to love the person in our midst whom we find boring, tiresome, awkward, malodorous, slightly different, a little bit unusual, or just plain inconvenient. I am afraid, however, that that *is* the person I am called to love, and I fail constantly, and so do you.

The story of Holy Scripture is of God's overwhelming love for the world, in its totality and in particular, and our singular failure to respond to God as we ought. It is, then, the story of God's unrequited love for a world into which His Son was thus sent to surrender his life.

There are different ways of thinking about this moral failure of ours. The Christian tradition, especially in the west, thinks about this in terms of the fallenness of human nature. We inherit from our ancestors a tendency to sin that only God, in His infinite Grace, can heal. In the Jewish tradition, we have been created with a good inclination and an evil inclination (*yēšer hāra*). God created the evil inclination, but gave the Torah to his people as an antidote.

Within this morally compromised and messy world, Israel, and by extension the Church, is given commands to love the Lord, and to love their neighbour, as an antidote to the consequences of our sin. In fact, the command to love our neighbour is only one part of a more encompassing set of commands in Leviticus. “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18), but you shall also love the stranger (*gēr*) who resides with you as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:34).

This is not, however, the same thing as loving everyone in general, as if love were something that could really exist in the abstract. In Leviticus, and in the Gospels, this command implies that we have a bond, a relationship, with those alongside whom we live. Our lives are intertwined with theirs, and theirs with ours. We are implicated in their sins, and they in ours. This can be a hard thing to recognise in our fragmented and disconnected world, where we live and work in little boxes, and interact with the most important people in our lives through a screen. But it is true nonetheless. So maybe there is more to the lawyer’s question than appears at first sight. “And who is my neighbour?”

The parable Jesus tells seems straightforward, and it is very familiar, but there is more to it than meets the eye, and it is easy to get it wrong. It assumes that the lawyer from Judaea will be shocked to be told he needs to learn a lesson in neighbourliness from a Samaritan, and presumably he was. But to call the good neighbour “the Good Samaritan” is to buy into the idea that all other Samaritans can be assumed to be bad. Maybe there were people who thought this in Judaea at the time of Jesus, perhaps even the majority, but it is unlikely to be the whole truth. Some Judaeans would surely have thought less ill of Samaritans, and *vice versa*.

There is, in fact, a story in 2 Chron 28:8-15 that anticipates the parable in Luke. There, an Israelite army during the reigns of king Pekah of Israel and king Ahaz of Judah captures thousands of their “brothers” from Judah and takes them, along with the spoils of war, back to Samaria. Thereupon a prophet called Oded arises in Samaria and rebukes them. In response, a group of Samaritans refuse to accept the captives, instead releasing them, clothing the naked, giving them food and drink, anointing them, and then mounting them on their donkeys and bringing them back to Jericho. Even Samaritans, in Chronicles, can be good neighbours.

In the parable, Jesus is alluding to the three divisions of biblical Israel. Israel, in Scripture, is divided into Priests (descended from Aaron), Levites (descended from Levi), and all Israel (descended from the other sons of Jacob), depending on how close they were to the worship of the Temple. Judaeans and Samaritans alike would have associated themselves with “Israel,” even though many Judaeans and Samaritans would have denied the other the right to belong. So it would presumably have come as a shock to a lawyer from Judaea to hear the people of God divided into a Priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan.

The Priest and the Levite are supposed to know how to behave as neighbours to someone in need, simply because they were in need, regardless of who they happened to be. That they walked on by is supposed to condemn them as morally bankrupt and spiritually empty, or,

better, hypocritical. We are not told why they walked on by, though we can be sure it had nothing to do with any fear of being rendered impure by a corpse. Apart from the fact that there is no hint in the parable that the man looked anything other than alive, albeit badly injured, neither the Priest nor the Levite was on his way to serve in the Temple. They were *going down* from Jerusalem, the same way as the injured man, not *up* to the Temple, and in any case in Jewish tradition honouring the bodies of the dead was extremely important (as the book of Tobit reminds us vividly), even though Priests in the book of Leviticus are supposed to avoid touching the corpse of anyone outside their close family (Leviticus 21:1-4), a restriction not binding on Levites. Perhaps they were afraid of meeting the same fate as the injured man. After all, the open road was dangerous. In the book of Amos, the prophet asks whether two people walk together on the road if they had not made an agreement to do so (Amos 3:3) — because the road was dangerous. But we do not know. All we know is that the lawyer is supposed to learn from a Samaritan, of all people, what it means to fulfil the command to love one's neighbour. And in the process, he learns from the Samaritan who his neighbour is: the one who needs your help.

So this is a story of religious hypocrisy, the hypocrisy of the Priest, the Levite, and perhaps the lawyer himself. This is a theme that comes up again and again in Scripture. We see it in the book of Amos in the person of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, who eight centuries before Christ served the king of Israel. Even he is morally complex. He thinks he is doing the right thing by telling Amos to flee to Judah and earn his living there (that is what “eat bread” means in Amos 7:12), because the message of judgement that Amos preaches is threatening to Israel and her king, Jeroboam. Perhaps he is afraid for Israel, or for his own skin, or perhaps he is genuinely afraid for the well-being of this prophet, who could end up being punished by Jeroboam for his treacherous words. But whatever his motivation, Amaziah seems to make the mistake of thinking prophecy is what Amos does for a living. A true prophet, however, cannot be bought, and Amos replies by telling him he was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees (or whatever the Hebrew of Amos 7:14 means). The God of Israel, however, took him from his work and called him to prophesy to His people, Israel.

And his message was one of judgement, against the moral hypocrisy of a people who went to worship but ignored the injustices of their society, injustices that left people bereft of a livelihood and caused such offence to God that the order of creation itself was disturbed.

Amos had the sort of spiritual insight that most of us, like Amaziah, do not. Such as Amos see things as they truly are in the world, as God sees it. He sees the consequences of our small sins and compromises, for other people, and for the land on which we depend for our lives. We are guilty, all of us. It is because of us that robbers beat the traveller on the road to Jericho and left him for dead (even if only in a parable). And the only remedy in this world is to try and learn what it means to love, not everyone in general — which is meaningless — but each person who has a claim on us, and as we learn that, perhaps we might one day have the faith and the insight to begin to see things as God sees them.

Amen