

The Sermon

at the Parish Eucharist at St Mary's Barnes

11th July 2010, 10.00am

"A Samaritan while travelling came near him...and was moved with pity" Luke 10.33

Thank you so much for your invitation to me to help out during the present interregnum. It is lovely to be back. And Katharine joins me in this thank-you, from her position among the sopranos in the choir. I must say it is even more delightful than it was when I was rector here; since now, from the pleasant vantage point of retirement, I can survey the challenges and problems facing this special parish without having myself to do anything about them.

I am delighted to hear of the appointment of Richard Sewell to be your next rector. I do not know him, but he is much of an age that I was when I came here, I gather he, like me, has a beard, and of course he is another Richard. So this must surely augur well!

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking Ross Collins for his friendship to me during his time as rector, and wish him and Lindsey every blessing as they move to their new life and work in Sherborne.

One of the pleasures of being retired is having the space and the permission to reflect on my years of ministry. I look back on my Barnes years 1991-2000 with great fondness. I worked alongside some remarkable colleagues, both ordained and lay; I had the privilege of leading worship in this exceptional building; and had the delight of serving the wider community of Barnes, which as we all know is quite London's smartest village.

And since the churchwardens have recently been going through the process of appointing a new Rector in succession to Ross Collins, it might be worth mentioning one of the questions I remember being asked when I was interviewed for the post 20 years ago. "Barnes is a very privileged place," said one of the churchwardens who had better be nameless, "how do you think you will challenge people here?"

It was a fair question, and not one for which I had a prepared reply. What I think I answered was something on the lines that my privilege was not to live in Barnes, but to be ordained to the priesthood, which required me to opt out of the rat race; and that I would challenge the parishioners of Barnes by offering a different way of being. It all sounds so easy, and I don't know if this is what got me the job. Those of you who remember my ministry can decide if I lived up to the challenge of being different, or simply became like everyone else.

I mention this recollection, not just to offer a comparison with the interview process which has just happened, but because I think I was suggesting that there is more to being the Church than simply

affirming all that is good about our way of life. A priest, and indeed a Christian, is called not just to be cultural, but also to be counter-cultural. The whole experience of Christian calling, in fact, is to take you out of where you habitually are and compel you to move on to a place you might not have expected to be.

Today's gospel reading, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, is really about this very issue. This is possibly the best known of all Jesus's parables. The "Good Samaritan" has passed into folklore, and in doing so has succeeded, confusingly, in changing the meaning of the word "Samaritan" – thanks in no small part to a distinguished former resident of Barnes, no less, the late Prebendary Chad Varah of Hillersdon Avenue, who founded the organisation dedicated to coming to the rescue of the desperate and suicidal which bears the name "Samaritans". It should of course have been called "Good Samaritans", but there you are.

But in New Testament times Samaritans were far from good. For more that 800 years Jews and Samaritans had been at daggers drawn over differences to do with land rights, ethnic background and religious understanding. They hated each other like poison. As St John says emphatically, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4.9). It's an antagonism that is still reflected tragically in the smouldering tension between Israel and Palestine today. Both sides claimed to be the true inheritors of Abraham and Moses; both sides as a result regarded themselves as the rightful possessors of the land. Few Israelis today will travel from Galilee to Jerusalem by the direct route because it will take them through the West Bank and risk violence. In exactly the same way, 1st century pilgrims making the same journey would prefer, as Jesus himself did, to travel down the Jordan valley to Jericho and then turn west up the hill to Jerusalem. It was much safer.

But not entirely safe. As our story tells us, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, with its twists and turns, was a haven for brigands. If you were travelling alone you might be attacked. And so we hear how a man going down this road was set upon, robbed, stripped, beaten and left for dead. It was a common mugging, with all its terrifying consequences. So Jesus asks, "Who will be neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?" (Luke 10.36). First came the priest, deep into the requirements of Temple ritual, no doubt reciting his prayers as he went; when he saw him he went by on the other side. Then came the Levite, immersed in the demands of the Jewish Law; when he saw him he went by on the other side.

Finally a "Samaritan while travelling" came near him. I like that detail. "While travelling." The Greek suggests "on a journey" (*hodeuon*). This man is bound for no particular destination; he is not subject to any social, liturgical or legal requirements. He is simply travelling. He's a free spirit. And "When he saw him he was moved to pity."

And there follows the lyrical description of active compassion.

- ◇ He went to him; he crossed over the road
- ◇ he bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine in them
- ◇ he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and nursed him all night
- ◇ the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper saying "Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you".

Here is someone showing active compassion. He bestows generous human love, he lavishes medical care, he squanders time, he spends money, all for the sake of an unknown victim.

And the significant thing is it is counter-cultural. This Samaritan is free of the customs of the surrounding culture. He can do things which the institution prevents those functionaries from doing, and so has an opportunity to discover his humanity in the face of crisis. His freedom releases him into compassion.

Was this compassion purely human, or was it inspired by God?

I ask this question because of the current debate about atheism and Christianity. Is it possible to be atheist and compassionate?

In his recent book *The Rage Against God* the journalist Peter Hitchens has written a riposte to his brother the social commentator and avowed atheist Christopher Hitchens. After some years toying with atheism, the younger brother Peter writes of his return to the faith of the Church which he sees as providing moral direction for society. He writes, "Whereas the atheist will seek a Golden Rule for morality, such as "Do as you would be done by", Christianity requires much more ... to love thy neighbour as thyself is a far greater and more complicated obligation requiring a positive effort to seek the good of others, often in secret, sometimes at great cost and always without reward." ¹

The book really asks where altruism comes from. He says,

"Look at the unshakeable devotion of mothers to their children; or the examples of doctors and nurses risking infection and death in the course of caring for others; or the uncounted cases of husbands caring for sick, incontinent or demented wives (and vice versa) at their lives' end; through the heartrending deeds of courage on the battlefield, of men actually laying down their lives for others. While it is perfectly possible for atheists to do all these things", says Peter Hitchens, "it is rather more likely that believing Christians will do such things. And when it comes to the millions of small and tedious good deeds which are needed for a society to function with charity, honesty and kindness, a shortage of believing Christians will lead to that society's decay." ²

Straightforward altruism then, is a human characteristic. Any unbelieving person may be moved to compassion, to do something superhuman on behalf of someone else, to cross over the road. But a believing Christian will be more likely moved to compassion.

I need hardly say that I agree with this, and I'd like to suggest three reasons why this might be the case.

Firstly, to be counter-cultural needs some kind of conviction that compassion is what God requires. To go against the flow, to move out of your comfort zone, to cross over the road, needs some idea that God is calling you to do this. Christians are those who are alive to the call of God in their lives; that each of us is, like the Samaritan in the story, a "traveller" and that for each of us there is a task demanded of us by God. "Forth in thy name O Lord I go, thy daily labour to pursue." ³

Secondly, Christians are pre-eminently people of penitence, aware of our human shortcomings and weaknesses. Ours is no path of triumph, nor do we have all the answers. But out of our sorrow comes a recognition that we share this falling-short with all our brothers and sisters, and all are equally beloved by God just as we are. In this realisation, compassion is born. "Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice; if you O Lord were to mark what is done amiss, O Lord who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you; therefore you shall be feared" (Psalm 130 vv 1-4).

And finally, Christians share the conviction that we meet Jesus there in the poor and the marginalised, the persecuted and the victim. If we want to know where Jesus is to be found, well that's where he is always present. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25.40). We are compassionate because Jesus has been compassionate to us in his death on the cross and his resurrection from the tomb.

So, dear people of St Mary's Barnes, please have these in mind as we struggle to live our Christian lives in times of doubt and antagonism. Ours is not a success story, but a story how, out of the sorrows of our world, God's new life forever springs out anew.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ *The Rage against God*, Peter Hitchens, Continuum IPG, 2010, p 104.

² Op cit, p 105.

³ Charles Wesley, New English Hymnal 235, first line.