

Trinity 4, 14th July 2019 Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries
St Mary's, Barnes

Today's Gospel contained what is I imagine, the best-known story in the whole Bible, the parable of the Good Samaritan, which appeals to religious and non-religious alike. But first it is worth noting the question which leads to this story. A man asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus in turn asks him what was written in the religious law. The man replied that we are to love God with all that we are and our neighbours as ourselves. Both these commands are in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament but in separate places. Deuteronomy 6, 4-5 says "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is the only Lord: and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." This was regarded as the foundation of the Jewish faith, which had to be recited twice a day. Secondly Leviticus, 19,18 "love your neighbour as yourself." What is interesting and important is that the answer links them together as the very essence of religion, that on which all else depends and by which all else is to be judged. Who first put the two together in this creative way? There are two versions of this summary of the law in the New Testament. In the other one it is Jesus who sums up the law in the way, and many would argue that he was the first person to do this. In today's version, however, the questioner makes this summary, implying that this was already part of the tradition, so we cannot be sure. The key point is that for Jesus, this is indeed the essence of the matter in the light of which the whole of life has to be seen and lived.

After that summary, the man then asks, "But who is my neighbour?", and Jesus tells his parable. There are three points to make it. First, the priest and the Levite who walked by on the other side didn't do so simply because they were heartless. In the parable the man who had been attacked was described as lying half dead. So, they would have

been conscious of the law on ritual purity which forbade people to touch a dead body. They would have been well aware of the command to love our neighbours, but they prioritised the law about ritual purity and did not go near the body in case the man was dead. Jesus, by this parable, makes it quite clear, as he does elsewhere, that humanitarian considerations outweigh the duties of religious observance.

The second point is that the person who went to the help of the injured man was a Samaritan. Although Jews and Samaritans shared the same scriptures, there was fierce antagonism between them. Jesus in his story, would have shocked his listeners by showing how such historic divides should be no barrier to helping those in need. It was a Samaritan, not a Jew who went to the man's help.

Then the third point is that Jesus does not in fact answer the man's question in a way that he expected. He had asked "Who is my neighbour?", implying there was a kind of boundary inside which you helped others, and outside of which you had no obligations. Instead of addressing that issue, Jesus asks another question. "Who do you think acted as neighbour? In other words, we are not to divide the world up into those to whom we have obligations and those we don't but to address a question to ourselves, "Am I acting as a neighbour?" Jesus ends by saying quite clearly "Go and do thou likewise". A detached theoretical question elicits not an abstract answer but a clear moral command to act.

The early church took that command very seriously. Love was at the heart of its life. There is not a book in the New Testament that does not stress it. It was clearly there, stressed twice, in today's epistle for example. And from the first the church set up a fund to support widows. As they grew in numbers, they did more and more to support the vulnerable. When in the fourth century, after a number of Christian emperors, Julian the Apostate became emperor and tried to

re-establish paganism, he admitted his religion could not match the church's philanthropy.

Margaret Thatcher once made a widely reported remark at a gathering of the Church of Scotland to justify her economic policies. She said that without money the Good Samaritan would not have been able to help the man who had been robbed and beaten up. And the parable stresses how generous the Samaritan was, paying for his keep until he was fit again. What she said was clearly true as far as it goes. What it fails to take into account is the very different world in which we now live. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. There was no protection and no hospitals. Any help would be the result of individual initiative. Over the centuries Christians began to change this general situation. In addition to encouraging individuals' responses-they founded great institutions, hospitals, schools, universities, almshouses, orphanages. Think how many of our great hospitals have saints' names for example love of neighbour was expressed in institutional form, as being more effective than individual action. In more recent years it instigated the hospice movement and has been a lead player in overseas development. In the thin air of our secular society all this Christian influence now tends to airbrush out of our history.

Institutions are still vital, however, Europe anyway, has moved on. A.J.P. Taylor began his history of the 20th century by saying that before the First World War someone could live in their village without being aware of the state. All that, he said, changed with the war. The state has now taken so many functions, especially education and welfare that previously depended on civil society, especially the church. Whether we like it or the policies of government affect, for good or ill, our neighbour. So, in loving our neighbour in need we also have to ask about the effect of those policies on them. So, someone travelling down a dangerous road today would expect police

to be around as a deterrent, with emergency services to call on in the case of an incident and hospitals to go to if there was one. If there wasn't, we would ask questions of Government.

The parable of the Good Samaritan does not solve the multiple dilemmas which have to be faced by both individuals and governments, for the fact is that we face many conflicting claims upon us. It does not tell us what to do. That has to be worked out. For example, between the need of any country to have a sensible immigration policy, and humanitarian considerations of those who seek to come here. There are now 68.5 million people in the world who have been displaced from their homes, more than at any time in history, more than half of them women and children. Some of them as we know, end up trying to cross the Mediterranean or the English Channel in flimsy boats. In many countries, including the United States, they are kept in detention centres. As I said the parable of the Good Samaritan does not pretend to solve the clash between different claims upon us. But what is clear from this parable and similar teaching of Jesus, is that we are to keep our hearts open to the need of our neighbour, whoever they are. We are not to harden our hearts against them. Humanitarian considerations must always be kept firmly in mind both by us as individuals and our government in its policies. That is the inescapable lesson of the parable.