

Being a Samaritan Pentecost 6 - 11th July 2010

Readings:

Luke 10: 25-37

Lord, give us eyes to see, and hands to help. Save us from the temptation to pass by on the other side when we are confronted with the needs of others. Remind us of our considerable gifts for service towards others. Recollect in our minds how we were needy, we were hurting, we were without hope and you reached out to us. Help us to help others as you so extravagantly helped us. AMEN.

I must be getting old. Jenny had to move out of the lounge room the other night as I sat shouting at the television. Increasingly I hear politicians of all hues and persuasions, making pronouncements, responding with knee-jerk reactions to manufactured problems, tinkering at the edges myopically, while the real issues are ignored or explained away as irrelevant. There must be an election in the air. The real issues - health, education, social welfare, the health and wellbeing of our community. In fact I sometimes wonder if the state makes it even harder for community to exist, so preoccupied is it with the economic and security pressures.

Am I getting old and cranky?

I don't think so. In the past ten years there has been a definite switch in how we see community. Fear is in the air. You see, we have to be so careful at the moment. Be so careful about reaching out and helping others. You can no longer put a band aid on someone else's child at school. They might be allergic and you could be held liable. Children can no longer walk to school on their own, as most of us did. And heaven forbid that our children should be hugged by adults other than family members. Volunteers too, have to be so careful nowadays. We all need police checks! There are regulations for everything. Try baking a cake for a fete. Try and get insurance for events that previously were held with no thought of lawsuits. Accidents happen. But nowadays we look for someone to blame them on. There's money to be made. Perhaps I am just getting to be a grumpy old man.

But I resent what's happening to our community. I resent seeing us look in on ourselves. I resent that increasingly charity is beginning at home, that in the main our society feels it must protect itself from those others who are outsiders. Our attitude to asylum seekers is a case in point.

Which brings me to our gospel reading for this morning. The parable of the Good Samaritan. A parable about how God has reaches down to each of us to bind our wounded souls, and leaves us in good hands promising to come again. The question that instigated the parable, 'who is my neighbour?' is as relevant now as it was when the question was asked of Jesus nearly 2000 years ago.

So let me read to you part of a sermon by the Rev Samuel Wells, an English minister, which I read through the week, which makes a scathing comment on how our western society might answer the question who is my neighbour.

The Jericho Affair by Rev. Samuel Wells in Christian Century of 29/6/04

Imagine that a Royal Commission was set up to report on the disquieting events on the Jerusalem-Jericho road and their aftermath. Here are some excerpts from the findings:

“The Commission is satisfied that the priest acted in a thoroughly professional manner. We are aware that he is a man of high profile in Jerusalem society, and that his first priority is to conduct his temple duties in a proper manner. Getting involved in self indulgent gestures of solidarity is not recommended: such projects are invariably under-resourced, non strategic and open to media misinterpretation. Moreover such involvement can have dangerous implications: if the wounded man had been found dead, the priest would have made himself unclean and thus be disqualified from conducting his core tasks for several days. On the other hand the half dead man could have been bait in a trap: the robbers might have been lurking nearby. We judge that the priest correctly valued his own security to be more significant than a pointless gesture.

The committee is well aware that priests as a group seldom take their full leave entitlement, and we are impressed by this priest’s ability to disengage from his role while journeying for a few days well earned rest in Jericho. In a busy world, this priest is surely an example to his people of prioritising and looking after one’s own needs.

The inquiry is similarly satisfied that the Levite did all that could have been expected of him. He showed commendable humility in following the example of his superior the priest, and keeping to the policy of non-intervention in circumstances of profound emotional manipulation.

It is understood that, unlike the priest, he probably had no pack animal at hand, and therefore could have given little practical help to the wounded man. Meanwhile, the Levite was subject to the same dangers that applied to the priest. All the best health and safety advice point to supporting the actions of the priest and the Levite. There is a model of interagency collaborative thinking.

Turning to the actions of the third party, The Royal Commission became suspicious on a number of grounds: First: the man should have shown some humility as the Levite did, and followed the example of the priest. We quickly realised that we were dealing here with a person who felt that society’s norms could be flouted at will.

Second: on the most generous reading, the man showed an unprofessional attitude by allowing his emotions to sway his judgement. Early signs were that he was not local to Jericho and that he became embroiled in matters that had nothing to do with him.

Third: and this is a technical point to do with the Scriptures - the man seems to have developed a rather exalted understanding of his ill-advised intervention. In binding the wounds and pouring on oil and wine he appears to have been engaged in a highly provocative - even blasphemous sequence of action. For in the Book of Hosea, Chapter 6- it is God who symbolically binds up Israel’s wounds with oil and wine.

The Commission therefore deems him to be some kind of prankster, because his use of oil and wine seem to be a spoof of the actions of the priest in worship at the temple. This is not an appropriate context in which to make a legitimate criticism of temple practice.

Fourth: the Commission was alarmed at the man’s behaviour in parading the half-dead victim into Jericho on an animal. We could draw only two possible conclusions from this.

Either this was some kind of effort to show off a misguided gesture before the townspeople in a puffed up manoeuvre designed to shame them, or and we favour this explanation, it was a foreigner's attempt to humiliate the townsfolk by displaying one of their number in a degraded condition. In fact, local speculation had it that the man had carried out the beating himself and was displaying the victim in an effort to intimidate the townspeople through a shameless feat of bravado.

Fifth: The fact that the wounded man was left in the hands of the innkeeper appears to prove our suspicions. The Commission is well aware of the low repute of innkeepers as a class of people. Clearly the intention was to humiliate the wounded man even further by leaving him impossible debts at the hands of the merciless innkeeper. Furthermore, it has come to our attention that the man who performed this regrettable series of actions was a Samaritan. So therefore it is likely that he was a criminal who assaulted a Jew, paraded him through the streets and left him with crippling debts.

However the Commission has heard another more charitable interpretation suggested by a rather excitable lawyer which in the Commission view beggars belief. It is that the Samaritan came down from above, had compassion, raised a man up, rescued him at great personal cost, suffered as a servant, paid a debt when the man had no resources of his own and promised to return and address any outstanding problems. The lawyer coined the name "Christlike" for this pattern of behaviour. Of course the Commission reject this interpretation as a totally unsustainable model of social involvement.

We conclude that the Samaritan was either a dangerous criminal or a naive fool. If everyone followed his example, we would all soon be half-dead and at the mercy of robbers. The only appropriate model of engagement with issues of social deprivation is that of the priest and the Levite, who acted with dignity and forbearance. We honour people of their calibre who establish careful codes of conduct, respect the privacy of the individual, follow health and safety legislation to the letter, and do not take on tasks that conflict with their roles.

They make society what it is today!"

But we as Christians are called to something different. we are called to be the body of Christ in the world. Called to live in community. Called to be open to all as our neighbour - to reach out with healing hands as we were reached out to.

To present Christ to a world hungry for community and that's what we've heard from Laura this morning!

Rev Tony Duncan

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