

Sunday 11th July 2010

Luke 10: 25-37 Neighbour

SING: "When I needed a neighbour" v1

Sydney Carter's song from the 1960s is nigh on 50 years old, and for all its simplicity, perhaps because of its simplicity it has travelled well, and still touches a chord in the hearts of young and old. And so it is sung both in schools and cathedrals.

Its strength and enduring quality is that it cuts to the quick, it gets right to the heart of the parable of the Good Samaritan – the challenge is inescapable. We, who know the parable so well, do we live out its teaching, are the principles of neighbourliness embedded and evident in the way we live? – so Carter has the insistent line

“Were you there,
Were you there?”

Such ‘Jesus principles’ are to be applied anywhere and everywhere by those for whom Christian principles have meaning.

You could even argue that they were guiding the actions of the Northumbria Police in dealing with the gunman Raoul Moat in Rothbury, before he tragically took his own life a few days ago. Even when faced with someone who had killed and maimed, and not withstanding the turmoil of their own individual feelings, the principles and guidelines for the Police in this country are designed to save life – and so patience and restraint were to the forefront – in other words – everyone, but everyone is seen first and foremost, as a neighbour.

In Jewish understanding and in Scriptural teaching there is a lot that relates to how we treat other people, be they local ‘neighbours’ or complete strangers.

The story of the Good Samaritan began with a testing question from a lawyer. He wanted to find out more about Jesus and his teaching. “Teacher,” he says “what must I do to inherit eternal life.” This is an open and earnest question. But the lawyer also wants to know whether the teaching of Jesus is orthodox and trustworthy. Jesus immediately spots this motive and neatly turns it back to the lawyer himself “What is written in the law? How do you read?”

The answer the lawyer comes up with is first class – any orthodox Jew would have been proud of him – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus then says “Do this and you will live” not meaning by doing this you will be sure of eternal life – that is not a gift to us through our own good works but of God's grace alone. Rather “Do this and you will live” means “If you live out these laws you will be living the life of the kingdom of God here and now.” In other words – Real life is loving without stint, without limit – generous in our love for God and for others.

The instinct of the lawyer is to press his case further and by doing so he draws Jesus into the minefield of Jewish rule-making, a strait-jacket of laws and commandments. “And who is my neighbour?” – tell me please Jesus, who am I commanded to love and who can I treat less lovingly without needing to feel remorse or guilt?”

The Jews argued much about who was, and who was not, to be classified as a neighbour. Fellow Jews, certainly – foreigners – probably not! Jesus, in the parable of the Good Samaritan shows that our neighbour is anyone in need whom we can help, anyone. And we ourselves are to put no boundaries or limits on who we are ready to regard as neighbours.

As the children's chorus puts it "Who does Jesus love? He loves everyone."

The Priest and the Levite who passed by the injured man had good rational reasons for their actions. In ritual terms, they would be unclean and unable to carry out their duties if they touched a corpse – and the man did look at least half-dead – anyway if you walked on that road alone you took your chance with brigands and bandits. Many would have thought it was the man's own fault for getting mugged. But Jesus, points out the heartlessness of religious legalism by commending the actions of a Samaritan, a non-Jew. And to apply this teaching today – we may be good-living, right thinking church people but if we end up by convincing ourselves that our Christian love is only to be shown in certain circumstances and only to people who are acceptable and worthy – then that is not the love of Jesus.

Now here is a puzzle.

In the first letter of St. John the writer urges us to love fellow Christians – quite a contrast it seems to the love without limits teaching of Jesus. St. John writes, "Anyone who says 'I love God' and hates his brother or sister is a liar."

Well, it may seem an easy option to love fellow Christians but could it be that St. John, in the setting of the earliest Christian churches was finding that the hardest neighbour to love is the one you are yoked to by your Christian faith? The General Synod of the Church of England meeting in York this weekend is a good example. The church then and the church now is LIQUORICE ALLSORTS – we have Evangelicals, Liberals and Catholics. Those who support the move towards women bishops and those who do not. Those who like hymns ancient and traditional and those who like hymns and songs, modern and contemporary. And each sincere person holds his or her views and believes them to be right.

Well, we cannot all be right. That way leads to a misunderstanding, faction, bitterness and ultimately schism and separation. What is true, is that LOVE for those who want to follow Christ must transcend and transform all the differences we have. "Anyone who loves God" says St. John "must love his brother and sister also" – not ignore them or go off and form a different church or enter into a slanging match in the press or the media. At the heart of it all must come the schoolboy howler "You must love your neighbour even if you hate him!" In the radical teaching of Jesus this howler turns out to be true "You must love your neighbour even if you hate him!" because if love comes first then it will erode and break down feelings of hatred or anger. And so we see that the scope of neighbourly love is both MACRO and MICRO. Jesus and St. John are on the same wavelength,

- Jesus showed that everyone and anyone is our neighbour and must be loved
- John showed that those you are closest to can be the hardest to love.

And it is true today – we must rise above differences between Christians and be committed to each other in love – then and only then will the fear and mistrust that threatens human relationships feel the healing power of the love of Jesus. You do not have to look very far to see the desperate need in the world for that kind of reconciling love but of course it is harder to admit that it has to start right here with you and me and our Liquorice Allsorts Christian brothers and sisters. Go on, take a good look around Perhaps the best possible way to begin is to let the ESSENCE & MEANING of the Holy Communion touch and warm our hearts – so here is a prayer that for me casts us upon the mercy and grace of God.

Prayers for the People – 28.58 “Jesus we come to this your table”

“Jesus,
we come to this your table
not because we are strong,
but because we are weak;
not because any goodness of our own
gives us the right to come,
but because we need your mercy and your help;
not because of anything we have achieved,
but because you died for sinners.”

[“Prayers for the People” ed. Michael Perry pub. Marshall Pickering 1992]

Coming together to God’s table,
aware of our own faults and shortcomings.
Reaching out beyond our little boxes and bubbles,
glad of the company of those around us –
that’s where our neighbourliness needs to begin.
Today, in our fractured society,
Lord, make me a good neighbour
And please show me who my neighbours are.
Amen

SING: Wherever you travel I’ll be there etc (last verse of Sydney Carter hymn)