
Am 7:7-17; Ps 82; Col 1:1-14; Lk 10:25-37

Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Of Jesus' 51 parables
spread across the 4 Gospels,
this morning's 'Good Samaritan'
is, along with
the 'Prodigal Son'
among the most familiar.

No doubt,
we've heard
numerous sermons
about it!

So, yes, feel free
to take a nap,
while I have
yet another go at it.

*

Though –
that being said –
there's an ever-new vitality
to the Scriptures,
by virtue of
the living Word,
to whom they
bear witness.

May he manifest
himself anew,
through –
or even in spite of –
my mutterings.

Enough!

Into our text.

*...a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.
"Teacher," he said,
"what must I do
to inherit eternal life?"*
(Lk 10.25)

Is the lawyer's query
sincere,
or sinister?

Is he setting a trap for Jesus,
or genuinely seeking
his opinion
on a familiar dispute
among Jewish rabbis?

As so often
in the Gospels,
Jesus answers
with a question:
Jesus said to him,
"What is written in the law?
What do you read there?"
(Lk 10.25)

"...the questioner...
becomes the questioned".
(E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Luke*,
tr., D. Green [John Knox Press, 1984], 186)

In reply,
the lawyer cites two texts:
Deuteronomy 6.5:
You shall love the Lord your God...,
and Leviticus 19.18:
...and your neighbour as yourself.

The linking
of these two commandments
as a summary statement
of the 613 commandments
in the Old Testament
was likely already familiar
in Judaism.

Certainly, their link
was significant for Jesus.

Both Matthew and Mark
recount separate occasions
when he cites them –
in his own words –
as the summary of the Law
and the Prophets.
(Mt 22.40; cf., Mk 12.31)

Regardless,
Jesus affirms
the lawyer's response:
You've given the right answer.
(Lk 10.28)

Then, echoing
the lawyer's original question,
he assures him:
...do this, and you will live.
(Lk 10.28)

Well, that should be
the end of the matter.

But not for the lawyer.

...wanting to justify himself,
Luke tells us,
he asked Jesus,
And who is my neighbour?
(Lk 10.29)

This question too
was a familiar dispute
among the rabbis.

In the scriptures,
neighbour identifies
one's own people –
fellow-Jews.

It's also applied
to resident aliens –
non-Jews living in Israel.

Controversy over the term
arose as to whether
it applied to
...tax-collectors and sinners,
fellow-Jews whose lives
don't measure up.

Beyond that –
what of Samaritans
and gentiles?

Who is my neighbour?

Luke tells us,
the lawyer asks his question
...*wanting to justify himself*.

Why so?

Does he feel
he's been made a fool of -
having asked a question
to which he himself
has been forced
to give the answer?

Jesus has said, in effect,
"You didn't need to ask me
about the way to eternal life;
as a lawyer,
you already knew the answer.
Practise what you preach!"

Is the lawyer trying
to wrest back the initiative,
by suggesting things
aren't as straightforward
as Jesus seems to imply?

**

Or, can the lawyer's
self-justification
be explained another way.

Does his follow-up question –
Who is my neighbour?
imply there are non-neighbours?

In which case,
he's asking about
the limits of love.

As one commentator
puts it – rather severely,
and I quote:

"The lawyer wants to
stop where he is.
He argues a *lot* –
to do a *little!*" (end quote)
(E. Schweizer, *Luke*, 186)

**

Then again:
Why does this lawyer

ask only about
the 2nd Commandment?

What of the 1st –
You shall love the Lord your God...,

Why not ask:
“Who is God?”

No doubt,
he's confident
he knows the answer
to that question.

But, as the parable
Jesus is about to tell
will make clear,
the very fact that he can ask,
Who is my neighbour?
exposes his ignorance –
of God.

To anticipate:
here's how
one writer puts it
(and I quote):
“The lawyer doesn't know
that only by mercy
can he live
and inherit eternal life.
“He doesn't want
to live by mercy.
“He doesn't even know
what mercy is.
“He actually lives
by something quite
different from mercy,
by his own intention
and ability
to present himself,
as a righteous man
before God
and others.

“Or, he thinks
he can live that way.
“He wishes to justify himself”
(end quote).

(K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, 417f.)

You won't like
what I'm about to say –

but here goes anyway.

Too many of us,
too much of the time,
are all too much
like this lawyer.

Oh yes,
we love those
who love us,
and yes,
show them mercy –
occasionally.

But does mercy
inform the rest
of our conduct –
- behind the wheel of our car,
- impatient with a teller,
- as the object of another's abuse?

Back to our text.

Jesus answers
the lawyer's question
by telling the parable
of the Good Samaritan.

I say, 'Jesus answers
the lawyer's question',
but that's not quite accurate.

At the end of the parable,
he asks the lawyer:
Which of these three
[the Priest, the Levite,
and the Samaritan],
was neighbour
to him who fell
among the thieves?
(Lk 10.36)

The lawyer had asked
about the neighbour
as the object of his love.

Jesus asks
about the neighbour
as the subject of love –
as the one who
acts lovingly.

The lawyer has asked
the wrong question.

The question is not,
Who is my neighbour?
as the object
of my love,
but, “To whom can I
be a neighbour?”

In other words,
Jesus has reversed
the question –
- from one of legal obligation
 (‘Who deserves my love?’),
- to one of gift-giving
 (‘To whom can I
 show myself –
 give myself –
 as neighbour?’).

One of my teachers at Oxford,
George Caird,
puts it nicely,
even epigrammatically
(and I quote):

“It is neighbourliness,
not neighbourhood,
that makes a neighbour”!
(G. Caird, *The Gospel of St Luke*
[Penguin Books, 1963/83], 148)

Or again –
combining the remarks
of two other commentators
(and I quote):

“One cannot define
one’s neighbour;
one can only *be* a neighbour”...,
(H. Greeven, in I. H. Marshall,
The Gospel of Luke [Paternoster Press, 1978], 450)

“...otherwise, the neighbour
becomes an object
of solicitude,
and the door is wide open
for a humiliating ‘christian charity’
that seeks a needy object
for a good deed”
(end quotes).
(Schweizer, *Luke*, 187)

It's all too easy
to treat Jesus' parables as
- isolated stories,
- morally edifying tales,
- a kind of Aesop's fables.

In actual fact...,
the story-teller
is as important
as the story.

Which is why
I've focused
- on the context,
- the setting,
- the particular occasion.

In telling his parable,
Jesus is recreating
the lawyer's world,
and with it,
the lawyer himself.

*

In hearing it anew,
this morning,
in the context
of the liturgy
of the Church,
the risen Jesus
recreates our world –
and us, in and with it.

“The lawyer
[and we with him]
...are confronted,
- not by the poor,
wounded man
in his distress,
- but by the
anything but poor
Samaritan,
who makes
no claim at all,
but is simply helpful.

“It's the Samaritan
who embodies
what the lawyer
wanted to know.

“He is the neighbour
the lawyer did not know”.
(Barth, *CD* I.2, 485)

Releasing us from
the self-imposed limits
and fixed standards
by which we judge ourselves,
and compare ourselves
with others’ achievements...,
Jesus apprehends us,
and liberates us,
for a new way of life.

Informed and shaped
by God’s mercy and grace –
incarnate in our redeemer –
we may begin again
in *newness* of life.

Our thoughts,
our prayers,
our conversations,
our deeds,
come to be marked
by a corresponding
mercy and grace
in our dealings
with others –
friend and stranger alike.

*“Which of these three,
do you think,
was a neighbor to the man
who fell into the hands
of the thieves?”*

*The lawyer said,
“The one who
showed him mercy.”*

*Jesus said to him, –
as he says to me,
and to you –*

“Go and do likewise.”
(Lk 10.36f.)

Amen.