

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PROPER 10
SUNDAY 14 JULY 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Psalm 82, Luke 10: 25-37

“Who will be My Neighbour?”

The story we read from the gospel of Luke this morning, the so called story of the Good Samaritan, is one of the best known stories in the Bible. It looks, like most of the stories Jesus told, deceptively straightforward. The message it conveys clear and simple: If you happen upon someone in a ditch, you should stop and offer them help. And: Help may sometimes come from people you least expect it from.

There is more though. Reading the story more closely there are some unsettling twists and turns that may leave you uncomfortable and wondering where exactly you stand in relation to it.

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, and he does what Jewish rabbis do: He tells stories. Stories with a twist that will make you think. When he responds to a question he doesn't give a straight answer but tells stories that are designed to throw up even more questions than they answer, confronting the person who asked the question with the flaws of his reasoning and addressing issues that go much further than the intention of the person who asked the original question.

“Who is my neighbour?” asks a lawyer who has come to “try” Jesus’ insights in the law.

“Who is my neighbour?” Is a question about boundaries: Who is my neighbour implies there are people who are not my neighbour and that the issue of where the boundaries between neighbour and not neighbour are, is something that can be discussed, can be defined and negotiated.

Jesus answers like this:

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.”

Immediately we are confronted with the first twist in the story: Nobody in their right mind would have travelled down that road on their own in those days. The crime rates were astronomical! And Jesus’ audience would have known this. They would have nodded sagely: Of course, he should not have expected differently.

Along comes a priest. Also travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Presumably he has just finished his duties in the temple and should be in a most pious frame of mind - intimately connected to God. Does he even see the man on the side of the road? Or is he so full of the wonders of worship and the religious experiences he has had in the past few days he doesn't look right or left?

Or maybe he was afraid. Afraid of touching the man because of the consequences it could have for his serving in the temple. He would have defiled himself and would probably have needed to subject himself to extensive cleansing rituals, perhaps abstain from duty for a while..... Wasn't his first priority the worship and service of God? And serving the people of God who would gather in the temple and expect him to be there for them, and not to be deterred from this holy service by the blood of one man?

Here is another twist in the story: The one we expect to help goes by on the other side. When the lawyer summed up the law earlier he said: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and the neighbour as yourself”. Perhaps this priest is doing

just that: putting God and his service first, and walking past because he has a duty to perform, a commitment to keep, a service to perform in the house of the Lord in the service of God and his people.

Likewise does the Levite. He follows the priest. As he should. It was his job to follow the priest and support him in the service of the Lord. He is a good Levite, faithful to the law and to the teachings of his superior, following in his footsteps.....

Love the Lord God with everything you've got and the neighbour like yourself. When in doubt, follow the leadership of your superior. And again of course this bit is full of twists, and humour, especially in the direction of the lawyer who asked the question. Here is somebody who follows the law to the letter and those in authority's every step. Which leaves the man in the ditch.

But a Samaritan - "but" indicating an important change in the direction of the story here. A Samaritan: for Jesus' audience the last person you'd want for a neighbour. Despicable, abject creatures no one in their right mind would want to have anything to do with. But - it is with this Samaritan that the downward spiral of the story comes to an end. He stops. He stoops. He cares. He heaps mercy on the man beside the road. Bandaging his wounds, pouring oil and wine, putting him on his animal, taking him to an inn.

There is no end to it!

Plus two nights' accommodation, all expenses paid, from a man who has the goodness of God written all over him.

A most unexpected turn of events.

A Samaritan stops to heap mercy on one in need, regardless of who the man is and what it may cost him, while those we would have expected to be close to God and intimate with his ways pass by on the other side.

"Which of these three do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" asks Jesus.

And the lawyer answers, apparently unable to get the word "Samaritan" out: "The one who showed him mercy". I imagine he was gritting his teeth by then.

"Go and do likewise..... "

Not likewise the priest, or the Levite, but likewise the Samaritan. Galling to say the least. Unbearable. And yet. He can't deny that it is the Samaritan who has been the neighbour.

The lawyer is shown that neighbourliness has nothing to do with us determining who would be deserving of our help. Of putting boundaries in place. But that it is about us seeking to become a neighbour when we are given a chance.

Would you have stopped and helped the man? Of course you would! No question about it. Even if it was a drug addict who had brought the gutter upon himself, even if it meant turning up late for work or not at all, or being beaten up ourselves. Of course.....

We follow the man from Galilee, a man despised, cast out, and killed on a cross. We are doers of the word, jumping at every possible opportunity to help. We can't wait to be a neighbour to somebody! Look at our programs, our charities, our contributions to the life of the community, how we look after the weak, the poor, the needy whenever and wherever we can. Not ashamed to emulate the Samaritan who heaped mercy on the man he found beside the road. And trying, every day, to do more and better. To serve, to

help, to look after those who end up on the side of the road with no one to help them. So yes, here at least is a story we have taken on board and have been busy living out. No doubt about it.

But we have not understood the story if we think that that is all there is to it. That we can now sit back and relax with a feeling of satisfaction. Because it isn't.

It is very easy for us to judge the priest, the Levite and even the lawyer and cheer on the Samaritan and be done with it. But there is more to the story than that.

Let's look a bit closer at those characters. First at the lawyer. He is somebody who knows the law, thinks he understands it. He has studied the scriptures. He is someone who likes his faith ethical and unambiguous, straightforward and clear cut. He wants to know where he stands, where the boundaries are. For him faith is a set of instructions he can put into practice, authority that can be identified and followed. And why not? He wants to live life well, be a faithful, righteous man living according to God's commandments. I am sure some of you will be able to identify with that!

The lawyer assumes he can ask the question from a position of power. That it is up to him to determine, following the moral guidelines his faith offers, who is worthy of being at the receiving end of his goodwill. So much to the homeless, so much to the Share appeal, so much to Zambia. Surely there must be boundaries? Surely my money is mine to give or with hold? Aren't most of us in the comfortable position of being able to look at the need around us assuming we determine what goodwill may or may not be offered? And don't we all ask that same question: Who is my neighbour? How far does my goodwill, my support, my charity need to go? So maybe we should not judge that lawyer too easily!

Now the priest: He is a man who loves his religion. He knows what is right and proper. Piously he steers clear of what may endanger or contaminate the purity of his heart, his dedication, his commitment to be a man of God. And wouldn't you agree that there are people and places you should stay away from if you want to be a good Christian?

Try identifying with the Levite. Following the priest, following established and trusted authority and tradition. Most of us do!

And then there is the Samaritan. Service changes him from what he is into the image of Christ. He becomes Christ to the man in the ditch. In him God's love and care find expression in the same way it took shape in the life of another man, despised and judged by the religious establishment, the law, and those in authority, a man whose life ended on a cross. In the Good Samaritan we see the image of Jesus reflected.

And what about the man? He should have known not to travel down that road. It could be said he brought his suffering upon himself. But, aren't we following a Messiah who did just that? Travelled down a road where he should have known trouble was brewing? A road where the law and the religious establishment, those in authority were bound to end up leaving him for dead? In him we can also see Jesus reflected, as much as we can in the Good Samaritan. Both show us where law, religion, and authority we all so very easily adhere to, may leave us if we forget that our main calling in life is to become a neighbour. A neighbor to love.

But also: as much as we may be able to identify with the lawyer, the priest, the levite, and hopefully the samaritan, isn't this man in need of grace and mercy. For us isn't it another character to identify with? Don't we all travel down roads we know full well have the potential to lead us into trouble? Don't we all end up in ditches, bleeding, and desperate for help?

And, are we, when we reach out for help, ready for that Good Samaritan to look different from what we expect? For the Messiah that is despised and rejected? To accept that we may be dependent on others this Messiah takes shape in, we may not like, or be prepared to love, one bit? Or do we still assume we are in

control, free to choose our neighbour, free to determine by whom and in what way we want to be saved? Then, surely, we haven't realised yet just how much we are in need of salvation ourselves.

As for the lawyer, we are asked to revise who we believe to be at the receiving end of a neighbourly relationship. To realise that neighbourliness may not be ours to give, but that it may be something we may be in desperate need of receiving. From both the neighbour spelled with a small and with a capital letter.

The story also shows us someone, who, in spite of all the prejudice against him takes the chance to serve when he can. He doesn't hesitate, he does not hold back. And it changes him from a despicable person nobody would expect anything from, to a neighbour. Someone in whom Christ takes shape. We, in Christ, are called to follow in his footsteps, aware that in dire need of salvation, of mercy and care ourselves we can change in people in whom Christ is reflected.

Amen.