

Luke 10/25-37: THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

A few weeks ago we looked at one of Jesus' best-known parables – the Parable of the Sower. Here is another of his best-known parables – the Parable of the Good Samaritan (told only by Luke).

There is, however, a crucial difference between the two parables. When Jesus interpreted the *Sower* to his disciples, he made it clear it was an allegory: each element in the story (whether person, place, object, event, etc) corresponded to something in life. "The seed is the word of God"; the Sower is...; each of the 4 soils are...

The *Good Samaritan* on the other hand is a classic parable: a simple, fictional story, drawn from everyday life, told to illustrate a single spiritual truth that Jesus is teaching. We should only allegorize a parable where Jesus gives us clear warrant to do this; if we try to allegorize other (most) parables we lose the true meaning of the parable and come up with fanciful, far-fetched interpretations. Augustine is one of the giants of church history, but look what happened to this parable when he allegorized it! (Underlined portions are from the KJV text)

"A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho: Adam himself is meant by the man; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half dead, because insofar as man can understand and know God, he lives, but insofar as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half dead. The priest and Levite who saw him and passed by signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin; oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast [donkey] is the flesh in which he deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the church, where travellers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that, which is to come. The inn-keeper is the apostle Paul, and the extra expense he incurred is either his celibacy or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the gospel was new, though it was lawful for him to live by the gospel."

The problem with this kind of approach to Scripture is not just that we land up with a fanciful, far-fetched interpretation was never intended by the speaker/writer, but we lose the plain meaning of the story and the simple yet forceful application of it in our lives. What is that meaning and that application in this case?

Jesus tells this parable to answer a question put to him by "an expert in the law" (v25). We should note that this guy was not someone genuinely seeking the truth and wanting to be taught by Jesus. He wanted "to test Jesus" (v25) – and possibly to expose him: the setting was public, not private ("On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus"). And he didn't really think he needed any teaching: "he wanted to justify himself" (v29) – i.e. he considered he was righteous before God and wanted to demonstrate that to Jesus and others.

Our expert starts off by asking, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus turns the question back on him (a good technique in any situation, especially when someone has this motive) and perhaps puts his inquisitor on the back foot by unexpectedly asking for an answer from the Mosaic Law ("what does the Law say?" v26).

The expert answers with 2 texts from the Law (v27). Jesus says it's the correct answer (v28a); in fact, on another occasion, when asked "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?", Jesus quoted the same two texts and said "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Mw 22/34-40). Jesus also says, "Do this and you will live" (v28b): in other words, if any man was to fulfil both these commandments perfectly (loving God and his neighbour all the time), he would have eternal life! Keep this essence of the law and you keep the whole law; you will be righteous before God and will live. [N.B. If it is true that any man fulfilling these 2 commandments perfectly would be saved, then it follows that these commandments summarize how those who *are* saved will live.]

With that, Jesus had answered his question and would have left it at that. But this 'expert' thought he *was* fulfilling the two commands and so was righteous; he wanted Jesus (and the others present) to see and say as much ("he wanted to justify himself"), so he asked him another question: "And who is my neighbour?" (v29)

Jesus answers this second question with the famous parable. In doing so, Jesus demonstrates that this self-righteous man (and all of us who may feel similarly about ourselves) is far from righteous – he is not keeping the second commandment and so he is not keeping the first either (and so does not have eternal life).

The story itself (v30-35) is simple and requires little comment. There *was* a major road from Jerusalem in the hill country of Judea “down” (literally) to Jericho in the Jordan valley. It passed through a wilderness area and robbers frequently attacked travellers on the road. Jesus was tapping into a widespread anxiety amongst the population of the day (security concerns are nothing new!): ‘everyone’ knew someone who had suffered, or had heard gruesome stories about ‘hijacking’ – so everyone could relate keenly to what Jesus was saying.

The spiritual truth that Jesus is teaching through this parable is: [i] who is my neighbour (that I should love as myself) and [ii] what does it mean to be a neighbour to someone (what does loving someone as myself look like). The parable makes it quite clear that, in God’s eyes, [i] anyone and everyone (especially anyone/everyone in need) is my neighbour, and [ii] loving your neighbour as yourself may be a matter of the heart (“took pity on him”) but that this is evidenced and proved by loving them practically and extravagantly in deed.

Jesus could have illustrated these truths by peopling his story with any three people; but he heightens the impact of his answers by making the two people in the story who pass by members of the religious establishment, who would have thought of themselves as righteous (such as our expert) and been respected as such by the people; and by making the person who actually recognized the robbed man as a neighbour and loved him accordingly a member of a half-race that the Jews (including their religious leaders) despised. The unmissable suggestion is thus that those who often think of themselves (and are regarded by others) as righteous are not; and, more than that, those they despise as unrighteous (untouchable) are sometimes more righteous than themselves. Such a subtext would have been not only unthinkable, but also deeply offensive, to Jesus’ inquisitor and hearers.

However unwilling the ‘expert’ may have been to acknowledge the truth contained in the parable, and with it his own unrighteousness (he was not even recognizing some of his neighbours, let alone loving them – so he was not fulfilling the law), the point was so clear that there was no other answer he could give to Jesus’ concluding question (v36-37). But he (and we) was now without excuse: he must “go and do likewise”.

To love your neighbour as yourself is to be like God! He takes pity on us in his heart (v33) and then evidences that by taking action – he has mercy on us (v37), doing whatever is needed, however costly, to rescue us.

Application: This parable is famous/loved because its message is so simple/clear and so telling for all of us...

Have we fancied that we are righteous / loving God / loving our neighbour when this story shows us we’re not? Have we selected and loved those we want as neighbours but hated our enemies – unlike God? (cf. Mw 5/43-48)

Are we ever like the priest or the Levite in the story? Do we pass by those in need without taking pity on them – either because we can’t be bothered (we are selfish, concerned only for our own needs, we don’t want to pay the price of helping or expose ourselves to danger) or because we have a prejudice against those who are in need?

Who are those we might pass by out of prejudice: (i) people from another race/culture/nation (the recent xenophobic attacks might give this parable an extra resonance at this time); (ii) people who belong to another religion/cult (incl atheists/humanists); (iii) people who live a sinful lifestyle (prostitutes, pimps, homosexuals, drug addicts, drug dealers, alcoholics); (iv) people who suffer from certain socially unacceptable diseases or conditions; (v) people who are ‘difficult’, demanding or just different to us (in dress, subculture, opinions)?

Do we have some real life stories of ‘priests/Levites’ or ‘Samaritans’ – our own, people we know / heard about?

Is there one or more situations we can think about right now where we have the opportunity to be a Samaritan?

Can we be more like God – showing mercy, taking pity and taking action? (Mic 6/8, Zech 7/9, 1 Jn 3/16-18)

Gospel Angle: If we fulfil the whole Law (perfectly love God and neighbour) we will live. But we can’t.