

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 124

31st July 2022

Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Luke 10: 25-37 ("The Parable of the Good Samaritan")

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, '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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

O Lord, our Lord, throughout the earth (CH: 5)

Be still and know that I am God (CH: 755)

Glorious things of thee are spoken (CH: 738)

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound (CH: 555)

There are 1001 ways in which the parable of the good Samaritan can be approached on a Sunday morning, and you may well feel that over the years you have heard every last one of them. And some several times. This story, after all, is both so memorable and so adaptable, making it great for sermons, school assemblies, internet reflections and more.

But today, courtesy of the Christian writer Rob Bell, we are going to approach this much-loved tale of violence, apathy, care and recovery from an unusual starting point. We are going to go back in time not just to first century Palestine, but much, much further back to the days of Noah and his ark. Trust me.

One lesser known part of the flood story is found just after the enormous escape vessel has finally come to rest and the waters have receded. You can read it for yourself in Genesis chapter 9, but basically there is an unfortunate drinking incident which ends up with old father Noah cursing the family of his son, Ham. Rob Bell takes up the story:

“In the ancient world, cursing was a big deal. Especially from your father. Cursing was way more than just words—it was about your father’s favor, your father’s blessing, your father’s validation. To be cursed was devastating—it stayed with you, it haunted you, it hung over your life like a dark cloud. So Ham’s son Canaan was cursed, which meant that Canaan’s sons were cursed, beginning with his oldest son, Sidon. Sidon, it turns out, had a number of sons, so many that Sidon went on to become the father of a nation. A nation that is mentioned again and again in the Bible.”

This nation of Sidon, the Sidonians, seem to have had a habit of leading key biblical figures astray. One of them married the great King Solomon, only to get him to worship a foreign idol. Generations later, King Ahab wedded a certain Sidonian called Jezebel, whose infamy may have waned over the generations, yet whose name lives on as a reminder of all things profoundly wicked. Lastly, the prophet Isaiah warns the wicked, hated, reviled Sidonians that they will find no rest on account of the scale of wrongdoing that has been theirs. And all of this is overshadowed in the public mind by a father's curse away back in the mists of time.

What are we to draw from all this? Simply that if you were of the Jewish faith you didn't just dislike your Sidonian neighbours for what they may have been and for what they may have done over all those years. *You hated them with a vengeance* for all that they had dealt out to your people in the past and (for all you knew) for all that they might very well deal out to you and your family today or tomorrow.

Now let's fast forward to Jesus telling a story to a lawyer who wanted to test him out. How exactly might Jesus rise to the challenge? Let's listen to his response ...

So, this Sidonian happened to be coming along the same road, just after the two uncaring religious officials had walked on by on the other side. The contrast could not have been more stark. People who knew how to keep The Law down to the finest detail seemed not to know how to react to human need when it met them squarely in the eye. By contrast, that passing Sidonian was moved to direct compassionate action, even though it meant helping an enemy.

The Sidonian bandaged the Jew's wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then the Sidonian put the Jew on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day the Sidonian took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

After telling the story, Jesus asked his listeners: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the Jew who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

He said, "The Sidonian who showed him mercy."

Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

And there, in a short-yet-so-meaningful story we encounter one of the great passions of the gospel writer Luke. While Matthew spends a lot of his time considering his Jewish community facing all sorts of dangers, Luke's outlook is a whole lot wider, encompassing Jews, Greeks, Romans and (as we see so startlingly here) even *enemies*. While we call this story the parable of the good Samaritan because he came from a place called Samaria, in reality the Samaritans were people of that cursed line of Sidon - a people whose heritage was both Jewish and Assyrian.

For Luke to include this provocative story in his gospel must surely point us to his deep desire to make a big point to his readers: that the teaching of Jesus catapults us far beyond our own cherished communities - beyond even the strangers whom we encounter. We must live our lives caring for all God's children, no matter where they have come from or what they might or might not stand for. We could ask whether the shocking nature of this parable led to Matthew, Mark and John steering well clear of it altogether. Only Luke valued it as having the power to make his readers think again about what it means to be Christian in a polarised world of hatred.

Having said that, we should never forget how the Bible can be misinterpreted to bring us to false conclusions never intended by the author. We might recall with humour how a generation ago a politician used this parable as an argument for private health care, declaring that: "Nobody would remember the Good Samaritan if he had only good intentions. He had money as well."

The direction of this parable would strongly suggest otherwise. The transformative power of the helper's actions came from his heart, not his wallet. Even if he had been a penniless beggar, surely the Samaritan would have given all he *could* give to do what had to be done by the dusty roadside that fateful day. The life-changing point which Jesus makes in this story is that when even *our enemies* display a natural attitude of open generosity to anyone in need, then we should take as our own that same philosophy of living. Indeed, as Jesus says, we must "go and *do likewise*".

Learning from our enemies? That's a tough challenge for anyone. We would far rather hate them or, at best, place them on the sidelines where we might comfortably ignore their actions and their words. But the writer Luke is not about sidelining anyone - any at all! His plea is for us to live out this truth: in Jesus we find the one who teaches unequivocally that all people - whether family members, strangers, friends, enemies - *all* are to be embraced as neighbours. More than this, that relationship of neighbourliness brings with it the requirement to get involved in what might be seen as a duty of care ... or, if you prefer, an obligation of love.

Duty? Obligation? Surely that takes us back to the kind of language used by lawyers like the one in today's reading. In our own world of rules and regulations that may well be true, but not in the Kingdom of God. For in that Kingdom care and love are laws which every citizen will gladly and naturally obey ... in perfect willingness.

The lawyer answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, *'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'*

Amen.

Praying for others

God of all the people,
we know that in this world of “us” and “them”
it is tempting to categorise people unfairly:
the young child who is a noisy pest;
the teenager whose clothes mark her out as different;
the homeless person with tattoos everywhere;
the big man in black leather who must surely pose a threat.

There are our labels and our pre-judgings
which guarantee that we will write folk off as different and dangerous.
But in Christ your Son we see one who does not walk on by on the other side.
Instead he shows us what care and concern and hospitality should mean
as we seek to follow in his ways, living lives of kindness and inclusion.

Challenge us and guide us, then, to step out of our comfort zones,
reaching out in friendship and hospitality
as we walk the way of Christ in our world.

Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill considers a season of warmth ... and heat:

In that magnificent opera *Porgy and Bess* there is the aria, “Summertime”: a soft and gentle lullaby initially sung to a child who will soon be orphaned in a storm. Summertime, we are told, is when “the living is easy”, though in the summertime of 2022 we are all experiencing a season of danger. While sun-seekers revel in the high temperatures, most are rightly wary of the risks which heat can bring.

A couple of weeks back the Met Office issued its first ever red warning in the UK - a reminder that no-one should take extreme heat lightly. And while this may be a hot and unpleasant inconvenience for most of us (not least at night-time) for others - the very young and the very old among them - the sun brings real danger.

As July moves on to August, bear these thoughts in mind:

- stay cool indoors;
- close curtains on rooms that face the sun;
- drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol;
- never leave anyone (human or animal) in a closed, parked vehicle;
- try to keep out of the sun between 11am to 3pm;
- if out, walk in the shade, apply sunscreen regularly and wear a summer hat;
- avoid exercising in the hottest parts of the day.

Put simply, enjoy the joys of the summer, but take care when care is needed.