

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

The story of the Good Samaritan – as we have just had in our gospel reading – is one of the most famous stories told by Jesus. It easily lends itself to dramatic retelling, and many attempts have been made to bring it up to date – to make it something that connects more directly with our culture and society.

It's a story we often use as we teach children the message of Jesus, as we urge them to care for all people.

Indeed in the last few weeks I have used the story at Messy Church, I have used it as part of an RE lesson for year 5 children on Christian love; I have used it in a school assembly and, just last week, we were acting it out in front of the year 3 children at Widney School as part of "open the Book" where we tell in drama form, week by week, stories from the Bible.

And we use the story – almost always – to think about the answer Jesus gave to the second question that the teacher of the law asked him. That question is, of course, who is my neighbour? And the teaching we draw out is generally about how we should treat all people equally – we should love those not just like us, but also those who are different.

And it's a message that is as relevant today as ever. We look around at a seriously fractured and broken society; a society where scapegoats are found all too easily; where blame is attached unfairly; where there is fear of the unknown and the different; where minorities are all too often vilified, where we all too easily divide ourselves into rich and poor, haves and have nots, educated and uneducated, Leave or Remain and any other number of divisions which just go to nurture an US and THEM mentality.

The message in the parable that everyone is our neighbour – that we are interdependent – is a message that we as Christians have not only to live out ourselves, but also to encourage others to do likewise. We are called to show that there can be and is another way - as the late MP Jo Cox said in her maiden speech in Parliament - ***We are far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us.***

But in that gospel reading, what about the teacher of the law's initial question? It's one that is often overlooked in the hurry to get to the story, in the rush to get to the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

This morning I would like to have a brief think about the question itself and the way it is answered by Jesus.

So what was that question?

It was, in case you have forgotten, **Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**

Now, that's a question that tells us a whole lot about this man's attitude to life; about how he understood his faith and about his picture of God. And the answer that Jesus gave tells us the truth about God and about life – which is far removed from the man's understanding. It's a question and an answer that we would do well to look at in detail.

And what makes it particularly interesting is that the teacher of the law's understanding of life and faith and God is so, so similar to the understanding that many people have today.

His basic philosophy goes something like this. God has given us the 10 commandments and a whole host of other rules and instructions covering all aspects of life. These laws and commands have been given to us so that if we obey them, God will bless us. Put the correct money in the slot, and God will give us the chocolate.

Look at the OT reading today from Deuteronomy.

*The Lord will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your ancestors, <sup>10</sup>if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*

At first reading this seems to back up the teacher of the law's viewpoint. Obey God and you will prosper.

And that's not far from many people's understanding of life today. We get what we deserve; you get out what you put in.

Or at least, we think, that's how it should be. But it isn't always like that.

How many times have you called out to God – That's not fair! How many times have you cried out to him in your prayers that someone you love didn't deserve to suffer, or complained that those who do evil seem to be being rewarded. Deep within our psyche is this principle of cause and effect, this idea of fairness which we think is how the world should be ordered.

And that is, I believe, what was in the man's mind when he asked the question of Jesus. Perhaps he wanted to explore the big question of why the good don't always get what we think they should have, and how it is that evil people don't get what they deserve.

What must I do to inherit eternal life – perhaps he wanted to catch Jesus out and say something like – we believe this – that those who obey the rules will prosper – but that isn't what seems to happen.

So how does Jesus answer that question.

In typical Jesus style, he answers it first with another question. *What is written in the law (ie the Bible – the Old testament)?; What do you read there?*

And the man quotes back what we have come to know as the summary of the law. Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself. And I suspect that the implication of his response to Jesus was that if one did that – ie obeyed the law – then one would be blessed and earn (note earn) eternal life.

And then comes the answer which, like the initial question, is often overlooked and overshadowed by the story of the Samaritan.

Jesus says *Do this and you will live*

Note what he doesn't say

He doesn't say *Do this and you will earn eternal life*

He doesn't say *Do this and you will be rewarded*

He doesn't say *Do this and God will bless you*

He says *Do this and you will live*

I think that what he is saying is that to truly live – to be in tune with God, to reflect the character of God, to honour God the best we can, to live as God wants us to live – our focus should not be “what do we get out of it?” but “what can we put into it”.

The Samaritan story, and the subsequent teaching about who our neighbour might be goes on to illustrate this well. True living is not about seeking reward, it's about showing love. To anyone who needs it; without considering whether we will be loved in return or receive anything back in return.

And this is life in its fullness, true life because it's the kind of life that reflects God, who is the author of life. It is God's life. And the supreme example of this of course is Jesus himself.

*Do this and you will live* is not simply referring to the length of life, but is about the quality of life itself. To really live, to have the fullness of life offered by God, we are to love unconditionally and without limits. True life is not about receiving but giving. Its not about what we get out of things, but what we put into them.

We can pick references up to this in the letter to the Colossians, where Paul thanks God for the people of Colossae not because of their deeds but because of the love that they show. They were beginning to learn the secret of truly living by loving.

And this message rings truer than ever today in a world where self is all important; where rights are supreme and responsibilities shirked, where all too often the “other” is ignored or worse; where the deciding factor in what we do is what we get.

The account of the teacher of the law and the story of the Good Samaritan is, like many of the incidents in the life of Jesus, a story without an ending. Jesus finishes his story with the question – who was a neighbour to the man on the road? The teacher responds in the only way he can – the one who showed mercy. Go and do likewise, says Jesus. Go and, like the Samaritan, show unconditional love. Go and truly live like the Samaritan. Go and live the life that God so keenly desires you to live, the life you were created to live.

So what became of the teacher of the law? We know no more. We can only speculate. Did he continue justifying himself by trying to earn his way to heaven, or did he recognise that true life – the life in its fullness that Jesus talked about and demonstrated - is about unconditional and unlimited love?