

As Yourself

a sermon preached on the

7th Sunday after Pentecost

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Amos 7:1-17, Colossians 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37

Jesus' teaching about the bounds of neighbourliness in today's parable could hardly be clearer. And probably because this particular teaching takes the form of parable it has stuck very firmly in the minds and hearts of Christians. It's very clear to us that the failure to attend to the needs of any person in need is a theological, as well as an ethical problem. Theological, because as the synthesis of those two teachings from the Torah¹ demonstrates, our relationship with each other and our relationship with God are inseparable. And so the church has always taken this parable to heart, and thus motivated and inspired has accomplished great works of charity, mercy, and justice.

And yet for all that 'good work', it is painfully obvious that we have not always remembered Jesus' teaching. And the litany of our failings in this regard is long and painful. How is it that in spite of the clarity of Jesus' teaching we have so failed, and continue to fail, to embody it? How can it be that faith in Jesus can be so readily employed by 'christians' in the service of justifying a world-wide economic system which systematically exploits, protecting the wealth of the wealthy? How can it be that faith in Jesus could so readily be employed by one of the greatest 'christian' nations in its systematic extermination of Jewish people? How can it be that faith in Jesus can be so readily employed by churches to justify a neurotic repressed sexuality? It's certainly not for lack of Bible information – as we see from the parable, those who walk by on the other side of the Jericho road, being priest and Levite, are very familiar with the Torah!

So what we recognise at first as an ethical problem – the neglect of neighbour in need – is at a deeper level a theological problem. This is because those who know the Law have sundered it: claiming to love God, but failing to love neighbour.

Yet beneath the theological problem there lies a psychological problem. Love God. Love your neighbour... as yourself. Love of neighbour and love of God require love of self. The psychological problem revealed in Jesus' great parable is this: The man who is beaten up and left for dead by the Jericho road represents some aspect of myself that has been neglected, discarded, despised; The priest and the Levite represent some aspect of myself which is unwilling to bear the necessary burden required by of divine wholeness; The Samaritan represents that aspect of myself which, though a despised outsider, is alone capable of bearing the necessary burden – and thus mid-wifing the new creation.

Perhaps, then, the key to the ethical problem is not so much a more determined effort to be 'good', running around helping all and sundry, in an ever increasing frenzy of activity. Perhaps the door to wholeness is opened through the task of facing up to the discarded, neglected and despised aspects of my self. The Divine economy in this parable depends upon recognition of those aspects of ourselves which we have neglected, despised, and discarded. Such recognition exposes those aspects of ourselves unwilling to bear the burden, reluctant to live the Divine economy of inter-relatedness.

Fearlessly honest confrontation with these aspects of ourselves, paradoxically, gives unexpected birth to that previously-despised aspect of our self- the 'Samaritan, who alone is capable of weaving the eternal dance – the *perichorēsis*', as the Greek church fathers called the internal relations within the Trinity - the dance by which are united love of God, love of neighbour, and love of self.

So perhaps, then, the liberation we seek, the liberation the world longs for, lies not by beginning with an effort to make ourselves more ethical, or 'godly'. Perhaps truly ethical and theological action begins in the crucible of the soul – in which, by God's grace, is assimilated into the Divine dance all that has been despised, neglected and discarded.

¹

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 & Leviticus 19:18