

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

Reflection: The Good Samaritan

The term, Good Samaritan, is still used in today's secular society. But I'm not convinced that it means anything more to the person in the street, than 'doing a good deed for another' or perhaps 'coming to the rescue' of someone in distress. Exploring today's secular understanding of the 2000-yr-old term would make for an interesting street survey!

But 2000 years ago, Jesus' response to the lawyer's 'trick' question: "Who is my neighbour?" was an outrageous story that overturned conventional Jewish understandings about who is included as God's people, and who inherits eternal life.

In the story Jesus told, his listeners and the early gospel readers would have noticed a number of surprising things:

- the foolhardiness of a man traveling alone, the dangerous route from Jerusalem to Jericho
- the actions of 2 highly-respected figures in Jewish society – the priest and Levite, who chose to put their official roles and purity laws, ahead of active compassion
- and just to rub it in, the one who reaches out, living out the law of compassion, is a Samaritan- one who in Jewish eyes, is at best avoided, and at worst despised.

In Jesus' time, the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagreed about everything that mattered: how to honour God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and where to worship. They practiced their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact with each other whenever possible. Each was fully convinced that the other was wrong. So what Jesus did when he deemed the Samaritan "good" was radical and risky; it stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person (or societal group) might add up to more than the sum of their political, racial, cultural, religious and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew, the myths they embraced and the prejudices they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises.

Though we're inclined to love the Good Samaritan, Jesus's choice to make him the hero of his story was nothing less than shocking to first century ears.

But the Samaritan story changes, depending on where we locate ourselves within it. If you're like me, you probably locate yourself in the priest and the Levite on bad days, and in the Good Samaritan on better ones. Sometimes we see a need and we pass it by because we're too busy or preoccupied, too bound by societal expectations or institutional demands. Too afraid, overwhelmed, or exhausted to care. However, the Good Samaritan is still the ideal we hope to achieve - still a great example story.

But what if Jesus's parable is more than an example story? What if it's a reversal story? A story intended to upset our categories of good and bad, sacred and profane, benefactor and recipient? If we too easily and comfortably identify with the Good Samaritan in this parable, maybe we're missing the point. Maybe the whole point of the Samaritan is that he is not us.

I'm reminded of a poignant story in a 'Walking the Camino' documentary – the story of six diverse people taking the Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage in Spain. One of the Camino pilgrims – an American woman – was struggling terribly with tendonitis and was walking a slow and agonizing journey. Like many pilgrims on challenging journeys, she was confronted with her deepest self, and reflections of herself in other pilgrims. She came face to face with her competitive ego and was forced to let it go and accept her

vulnerability. At one point in the 500-mile journey, she came close to giving up. It was at that painful moment that a Russian pilgrim met her on the road, and greeted her with a warm-hearted exclamation: "Ah, it is the American!" He took her pack from her drooping shoulders and carried it together with his own, for the days' journey. As she told the story through her tears later that day, she admitted: "I don't think I have ever been that kind to anyone in my life"

Sometimes we find it hard to receive from unexpected quarters. Sometimes we struggle to engage with, and understand those who seem foreign in their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

One who didn't struggle in this way – one who met all people exactly where they were, was our dear brother Jim – at his funeral on Friday we heard about this special quality – to meet others - however different - in their common humanity, even/almost– the young blonde woman draped in pink chiffon, encountered during his parish door-knocking campaign!

So, how might we recover the scandal at the heart of this parable? Let's consider: Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to deem "a good guy?" The last person you'd want to save your life? Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, impress, control, or save — but never, ever need?

Perhaps what we need to do is locate ourselves, not in the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, but in the wounded man, dying on the road. Notice that he is the only character in the story not defined by profession, social class, or religious belief. He has no identity at all except naked need. Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first — perhaps we have to become the broken one - robbed, bruised, battered - grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy — before we can feel the unbounded compassion of the Good Samaritan. Why? Because, as with the Camino pilgrimage, all barriers fall away on the broken road. All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear of necessity. When your mind, body or spirit lies bruised and bleeding in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, whose politics you agree with.

What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy and enable your healing, and whether or not you can accept the stark reality of your need.

If it hasn't happened yet — your encounter on that dark road — it will.

Somehow, someday, somewhere, it will happen. In a hospital room? At a graveside? After a marriage fails? When a cherished job goes bust? In late-life transition? After the storm, the betrayal, the earthquake, the injury, the diagnosis? Somehow, someday, somewhere. For all of us. It will happen.

When it does, it won't be our theology that saves us. It won't be our cherished affiliations that matter. All that matters will be how quickly we face our own shadow, look deep within, swallow our pride and grab hold of the proverbial hand we hoped never to touch. How humbly we'll agree to receive help from the enemy whom we fear. Whether that enemy is within or without.

"Who is my neighbour?" the lawyer asked. 'Your neighbour is the one who scandalizes you with compassion' Jesus answered. Your neighbour is the one who upends all your entrenched categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbour is the one who mercifully steps over the ancient, bloodied line separating "us" from "them," and teaches you the real meaning of "Good."

What shall I do to inherit eternal life? Do this. Do this and you will truly live.

In the name of God, creating, redeeming, sanctifying,

Amen