

THE STORY OF THE BIBLICAL SCHOLAR

Gospel Reading – Luke 10: 25-37

High Wycombe, July 14th 2019

I wonder how many sermons you've heard based on today's set Gospel Reading?

Perhaps you're new to faith and have never heard it before. However, for those of us who grew up in the faith, many will know it as one of the great Sunday School favourites – which, along with the story of the Prodigal Son, frequently gets enacted year after year. It's a favourite with preachers too, where it is translated into modern day situations with different types of people in need and various unlikely heroes, which is why it's given the title "The Parable of the Good Samaritan".

In googling the story I found that the Bible Society have created a powerful video for people to watch and reflect on, where a vicar stands in the centre of Reading and asks passers-by if he can use their mobile phone to call a friend. Virtually everyone stops immediately and lets him do so. He then goes and dresses up as a homeless man and offers people a £1 coin in order to be able to use their phone to make a call. Virtually everyone – save three wonderful people, all as it happens from BME backgrounds – choose to "pass by". It's incredibly sobering and makes its point well.

However, I'm going to say right now that I really dislike the title we give this parable of "the Good Samaritan" – not least because it's not very fair on Samaritans as it tends to suggest that some are "good" and others are "not so good", a classic case of unconscious bias. The main problem though is that it takes the focus totally away from what I believe the story is really all meant to be about.

I'm sorry to say that I think we have rather missed the full impact of what Jesus was intending to say here. We've taken the "easy interpretation", which simply says that we should try and show loving kindness or compassion or mercy (depending on

your translation) to all. Good Christians should be like the “Good Samaritan” (which of course is correct) – although if we’re honest not many of us are that good at it.

Why do I feel so strongly about this? Well, it’s because I believe it goes right to the heart of our discussions over faith and sexuality in the Church, and cuts right to the chase with our differences across our traditions regarding doctrine and the kingdom of God and how we deal with different interpretations of Scripture.

Let’s look at the story again together.

Jesus is being tested by an “expert in the law” who quite frankly is trying to trip him up. Now to put this in context, we’re not talking about a “lawyer” as some translations have wrongly described him, but an expert in the Torah – the Jewish law. Today we’d probably call him a Biblical Scholar, someone who was recognised by his peers (and it was always “him” back then) as being an authority on the scriptures. Jesus is now well into his ministry at this stage – he’s just heard back from the seventy disciples he sent out to heal the sick and cast our demons, and to let people know “that the kingdom of God is at hand”. The religious elite are getting increasingly threatened by his charisma, his teachings and his impact. Word of his miraculous ministry is spreading fast – he’s healed hundreds, fed thousands and some have even seen him be transfigured. Yes, whilst his teachings are based in Scripture, he is so unconventional – he’s breaking all the rules and challenging all the norms. And so, we have this Biblical Scholar who decides to “take him on” publicly.

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Note the focus on “do” – what actions, rules, law should I follow...as a good Jew?

And Jesus, true to form, side-steps the trap and instead turns the question around. He does this not to trip him up, not to have an argument or a scriptural sword fight, but to help this “expert” truly understand the central tenet of the faith they shared.

“What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?”

You're the scholar, you know – tell me. You've studied it and no doubt preached on it – so tell me in words that you know to be true what the core of our faith is about.

And so we hear the text book answer that this expert has probably taught all his life:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind” and “your neighbour as yourself”.

And Jesus agrees with him. It is the heart of the law, as we have heard Jesus teach throughout his ministry. Later, in his last few hours as a free man with his disciples, he will bring these two commands of loving God and loving our neighbour into one new single command, “love others as I have loved you.” It is the New Covenant of Grace which Jesus emphasises again and again in those last few hours with them.

But here, with this truth-seeker, who has had the courage – or is it perhaps the arrogance – to take him on, Jesus just smiles and agrees.

“You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.”

You can feel the expert in the law going red, and his blood pressure rising. He's come wanting a showdown, wanting to “take this upstart on”, and instead he's been the one to look rather silly. In my mind's eye I can see him having talked to his friends and colleagues beforehand, telling them that he is going to “take Jesus on”, and who knows – maybe they're all watching, keen for a battle between the Biblical Scholar titans. Some of you here may know the feeling, when we're being goaded – perhaps on social media - into having a debate over the meaning of certain verses in scripture. I for one believe that they are rarely fruitful and are really just a way of certain people wanting to bully others into believing that what they say is right.

And so, this expert in the law comes straight back with the question that cuts to the quick of everything. It's the real question that Jesus has been waiting for – the question that in my opinion defines his, Jesus', ministry. It's the question that lies at the heart of all our disagreements and all our differences over doctrine and

scripture. It's the question that has caused so many of us to feel excluded, and marginalised, and unlovable and unacceptable. It's the reason that Jesus has come – and the reason that He died, and the reason why He gloriously rose again.

“Who is my neighbour?!”

Is he the one (and in those days it was sadly “he”) who conforms to our way of thinking? Is he someone who is part of the tribes of Israel and obeys our law? Is he someone sojourning in our country, visiting it, a stranger made welcome to be with us but who should respect and adhere to our laws? Where do I draw the line? Who is on the inside and who is on the outside? How far does God's grace extend?

It's the question that Biblical Scholars have been grappling with throughout the centuries. This man is one of thousands who has sought to draw a circle around those who are “in” and so create a group of those who are “out”. A line which clearly shows where the boundaries are – sheep from goats, chosen from unchosen.

“Who is my neighbour?”

Are there limits, Jesus? Do I really have to love everyone – surely there are limits?

And so, Jesus answers – as he usually does – with a parable, setting it up in a familiar setting with familiar characters. The road from Jerusalem down to Jericho was notorious – 17 miles of rocky, desolate and dangerous terrain, so much so it was called “the Way of Blood”. Priests and Levites had to travel it often – they would have been familiar figures on the road. Were they too scared to stop? Were they too indifferent? Was this just another poor sod who they didn't want to get involved with? Had compassion fatigue set-in, as perhaps we too are more than guilty of – when confronted with a scale of need and desperation that we find ourselves becoming numb to? There are some who might think these Jews were being pious, and that they perhaps didn't want to defile themselves by touching a dead body. But I'm afraid that is poor defence as it was incumbent on all Jews to look to save

life, always – even if that meant becoming defiled in the process. Saving life is always sacrosanct. Sadly, whatever their reason – fear or indifference - their hearts were cold, and they walked on by. I think we can all be guilty of doing this at times.

As a brief aside, I do sometimes wonder whether the Levite – whose role in the temple was to serve the priests – had seen that his leader had passed on by, and therefore thought it legitimate for him to do the same. He at least looked at the man, the Bible says, before passing on by – which is more than the priest had done. Neither believed they could be seen by others – so they just did what was in their heart to do. I'm aware that some Christians may want to stop and help others, such as perhaps the LGBT community, who are hurting – but they have taken their lead from their leaders to just walk on by. As with this scenario on the Jericho Road, their failure to act can either be through fear or through following the lead given.

Now stories of this type were commonplace in Jewish tradition – three characters, the last of which was always the hero. Most cultures have them in some form or other. The crowd around Jesus would, I am sure, have been expecting him to say the third person was an ordinary Jew – just like them - whose heart had been touched. They were getting to know Jesus by now, and his message for the common man.

But that's why Jesus turns this on its head and surprises them all with his unlikely hero. He does so in order to confound the man who has been sent to test him, for it is he and people like him that Jesus is really trying to get through to.

I think most of us will know that Samaritans were not much liked by the Jews. We know they were despised and seen as “the enemy”, the least likely of all heroes. What we may not be so aware of is that the reason why there was this deep dislike was because of theological differences regarding the Torah. At least, that's how the disagreements started – they then just became a front for intolerance and disdain, where a whole group of people become “the enemy” due to age-old prejudices.

Jesus doesn't make any statements – frankly in any of ministry – about doctrinal interpretations of the law, but he does constantly focus on the all-encompassing power of God's love. That it is available for all – without exception. That no biblical interpretation or difference of opinion should stand in the way of it. We are all called to love each other as Christ has loved us, without exception.

Particularly those we have differences of opinions with. Particularly those who revile and hate us, who wish to trip us up and test us, who want to exclude and marginalise us. This story is the story of an “Exclusive Biblical Scholar” who is taught to open his eyes and see the hurting individuals lying in front of him, and show them compassion, love and kindness. The worst thing that he could do is to be cold or indifferent to their pain, but instead to help heal their wounds and bring them life.

Those of you who have, like me, been hurt and wounded by too many Biblical Scholars will know exactly what I mean. But please note, this parable is for us too – for we are all called to love all, always – and to let Jesus do the rest.

So why do I call this the “Story of the Exclusive Bible Scholar”?

Well, because it is the way that Jesus' choose to engage with those who wanted to test him and “take him on” over his Gospel of Love.

They believed that his message of love was too simple, too easy and didn't do justice to all that they had been taught in Scripture.

But Jesus cut through all of that, by appealing to the truth that “Love Always Wins”. It does not matter who we are, where we have come from or where we are going, if we have love in our heart for our neighbour – and look to love them as Christ as has loved us, then we will – as Jesus himself promised us, abide in His love and He in us.

It really is that simple – and don't let any Biblical Scholar tell you otherwise!

Amen.