

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**10<sup>th</sup> July 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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A friend of mine once suggested that the parable of the Good Samaritan was an easy one to preach about. In one sense, of course, they were right. It's one of the 'feelgood' passages of the Gospel. There's apparently a clear sense of right and wrong. What is being asked of us doesn't sound too difficult – it's about being kind to people and practical. And it has a happy ending.

For the lawyer asking Jesus the question, it starts out as an easy one too. He seems to know the answer to his own question. 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' - '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'. Jesus confirms to him: 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

The conversation could have ended there - they have had a polite exchange, and they appear to be agreeing - and in Matthew and Mark's Gospels it does end there. But Luke, with his characteristic focus on how Jesus's message is not only for the nation of Israel but for the benefit of the whole world, goes further. He recounts that the lawyer wanted to 'justify' himself by asking a further question. It's not entirely clear why. Perhaps he wants Jesus to give him greater

affirmation (of the 'I wish all disciples were as clever as you' type). Or perhaps he wants to justify why he has asked a question at all if he already knew the answer. Or it may be a case of genuine doubt. Some of the rabbinic teachings of the time confined 'neighbour' to those who shared the same religious affiliation. Whatever the reason, Luke leads us through this into deeper territory that is suddenly much less easy, less comfortable.

Jesus tells the story of an attack on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Some of you may have visited the Holy Land, in which case you will probably know it. It's a steep road, twisting through barren red rocks, and in the past was notorious for its bandits. As a result of that combination, it is sometimes referred to as the Red Road, or the Road of Blood. A place of violence and danger. To be fair to the priest and to the Levite (who would have ministered in the Temple), they had every reason to pass by on the other side. The body in the ditch might have been a decoy, a trap which would have resulted in them being attacked themselves. The body might have been, or become, a dead body, so that by touching it they would have been prevented from carrying out their religious duties.

But the Samaritan does something different. He is moved with pity and crosses the road. It is hard for us today to get a real sense of the shock that example would have caused to Jesus's hearers. The Samaritans were descended from a population who had occupied the Holy Land after it was conquered by the Assyrians. They had opposed the rebuilding of the Temple and they worshipped differently. So they were social outcasts, ceremonially unclean and religious heretics. They were the hated 'other', the untouchables. Notice how at the end, when Jesus asks the lawyer which of the three was a neighbour to the one who

needed help, the reply comes back 'The one who showed him mercy'. He cannot even bring himself to utter the word 'Samaritan'.

I wonder who the Samaritans are for us, in this place and time? Who are the people we find it difficult to name? Whom do we scapegoat, loading onto them our collective sense of unease about ourselves, reassuring ourselves that at least we are not as bad as 'them'? Try reading the parable substituting the word for that 'other' in place of 'the Samaritan'. How does it sound? This is not 'easy' any more. Jesus is taking us into a concept that he has touched on already in his ministry and which was getting him into trouble. For his message is not just 'love your neighbour as yourself' but 'love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you' (Luke 6.27-28). Suddenly what is being asked of us is way outside our comfort zone.

We are living in complex times. Politically, there is a sense of polarisation which could tip into tension and unrest. In France, the lack of a majority in the National Assembly offers the prospect of five years of political in-fighting. In the United Kingdom, the resignation of the prime minister will open up tensions, new and old. All this in the context of some of the most troubling economic news for over a generation, of war, and of a pandemic that will not go away.

Against this background what, as followers of Christ, are we called to do? Jesus gives us the answer in today's Gospel, an answer that has not changed: we are to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves. Our neighbours may be our enemies, but we are to love them just the same. That doesn't mean we have to like them. But to treat them as we would ourselves. Our task as Christians is to love the stranger. To stay in the conversation, to hear out the 'other', encountering them as a child of God, treating them as another subject and not an object. Not 'a Samaritan', 'a foreigner', someone who votes differently from

me. This is Christ's message to us, and the world's need for it is greater than ever in times such as these.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus also urges us to action. 'Go and do likewise.' There is a physicality about it. The Samaritan crosses the Road of Blood, bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine in them (Luke, the doctor, cannot help adding this detail). He picks him up, takes him to a place of safety, spends money on him.

Closer to home, what might we do that is practical? Today is Sea Sunday. This church has always had a vocation to look after seafarers. The current version of it is our volunteering with AMAM, the *Association Marseillaise d'Accueil des Marins*. So much of AMAM's work has been on hold because of the pandemic, but now it is starting up again. Seafarers have suffered deeply as a result of the pandemic, often spending months cooped up in small spaces with no certainty of when they might be able to return home. The toll on their mental health has been severe. We owe it to them to renew our practical commitment through AMAM now that it is possible again. Even if we cannot volunteer at the seamen's club, we can do other things like knit hats for them, or prepare parcels of personal items that show in a simple, practical way that someone cares about them.

In the more difficult area of loving the person we feel very different from, if we want to follow Jesus's example, we must start by crossing the road. It will be costly. For radical love is risky. It is not, as my friend's words seemed to suggest, 'easy'. This sort of radical loving is summed up by St Paul in a passage from the Letter to the Romans which we read in Morning Prayer this week:

‘Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’

The good news is that we don't have to do this alone. We do it with Christ, in Christ, and he will be beside us, every step of the way. Thanks be to God.

Amen.