

‘And who is my neighbour?’

The question posed to Jesus by a lawyer who had earlier asked him what he must do to attain eternal life. Jesus, as we read, had thrown the question back to him. What does the Law say? He had replied with the classic summary of the Law: love God and love your neighbour. Jesus had said, ‘Do that and you will live.’ The man was still not clear in his own mind. The matter of loving God was straightforward enough. There were the detailed regulations of worship, of sacrifice, of prayer, of tithes. Love your neighbour – that one needed to be teased out a bit. It lacked the precision of the first command. And so he asks – who is my neighbour, who is this person that I am to love as I love myself?

When I ask ‘Who is my neighbour?’ I am also asking a question about how I see myself. In the Jewish society in which the lawyer lived there were concerns about questions of ritual purity – mix with the wrong sort of people and you end up rendering yourself unclean and so unable to participate in the worshipping life of the people. And so, you steered clear of people like lepers. You did not associate with people like tax collectors, known sinners or Gentiles and certainly not Samaritans – you certainly would not have shared a meal with them. Groups such as the Pharisees would have tended to restrict social contact to fellow Pharisees. In that society the concept of neighbour, the one I am to love as myself would have been determined by how I saw myself, my understanding of my own identity.

It is easy to look askance at people of those day, but that question is just as true today as it was then. ‘Who is my neighbour? Who am I?’ What lies at the heart of my own identity, my own self-understanding? Am I just a member of my own family? If that is the case, then only my own flesh and blood is my neighbour. We could extend this and ask am I just a member of my own community. If that is so I am still restricting any claim on my concern to that of my own community. The poor, the alien, those who are different, the drug addict, the asylum seeker, the single parent, the traveller have no claim to my concern.

But the Bible is quite clear on this one, it tells me that I am more than a member of my family, more than a member of my own community, I am one made in the image of God. That applies not just to me but to everyone else on this planet. Moreover, I am told that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. I am challenged to look beyond myself, beyond the familiar.

Of course, in times of uncertainty, we can forget this fundamental truth. In times of civil unrest, in times of economic downturn, the outsider, the one who is different can be viewed as a threat. The rise of the far-right groups across the world have manifested themselves in a rather narrow nationalism which expresses itself in promoting intolerance of those outside our own particular national group. It has saddened me to see how this has fed into the debate about Brexit in the UK and the political life of the United States. As our own vision of neighbourhood is narrowed, so my own self-understanding of what it

means to be one made in the image of God, my common humanity with all who walk this earth with me is diminished – and I am the poorer.

Of course it was into a divided society that Jesus spoke the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a story that has become so familiar that it has lost something of its power to shock and to challenge that it had when it was first told.

The story of a pilgrim from Jerusalem who travelled a lonely highway, beaten, robbed and left for dead. There are the representatives of his own community, to whom he would have looked for support, who pass him by, not wanting to get involved, fearful for their own safety. It is a Samaritan, despised by every right thinking Jew who stops, who takes the risk of involvement, binding up his wounds and taking him to an inn; who makes an open ended commitment, telling the inn keeper, whatever more it costs you, I will repay you.

Jesus asked the lawyer, ‘Who was neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?’ ‘The one who helped him.’ ‘Go and do the same.’ The question was changed – from ‘Who is my neighbour’ to ‘Who can I be a neighbour to’; from that of what am I obliged to do; to that of what can I do for those who need my help?

Several centuries earlier, Jesus’ ancestor Ruth had stood with her mother in law Naomi in Moab. Both widowed, Naomi about to return to home to Bethlehem, had sought to persuade Ruth to stay with her own people in Moab. But Ruth had declared, ‘Where you go I will go, where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God.’ Sharing a common

humanity, a common identity that transcended their difference, Naomi and Ruth, Jew and Moabite, set out on a common pilgrimage, even unto Bethlehem.

This parable of the good Samaritan is one of those stories that challenges me to look at the way I think and act in the light of Christ; to move out from the familiar security of family and community to find a common humanity with those who are different; to reach out in love and concern, to bring something of the love of Christ to bear on this wounded and hurting world. and so proclaim in our own lives the truth of the Lawyer's words

‘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.’

Grant that what we say with our lips, we may believe in our hearts and what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives. Through Christ our Lord. Amen