

LUKE 10:25-37

It was a hot place to be; walking that road was hard work; there was no shade, no water, walking between blistered limestone rocks and bare hills. It was 17 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho with the road dropping down 3300 feet so it was also steep, dropping down into one of the hottest parts of the country at 800 feet below sea level. It was the most inhospitable place to be, yet it was also the pilgrim road to Jerusalem from Jericho and the surrounding parts of the country, a road that Jews would often walk on their way to and from Jerusalem; the pilgrims became an easy target for the bandits and robbers who were hiding in the hills.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was set in that place. It was along that road that the man was walking when he was set upon by robbers and left half-dead on the road. It was along that road that two Jews came, one a religious cleric, a priest, on his way to Jerusalem perhaps and he saw the man but walked past; the other was also a Jewish religious man, but he too walked past. Were they frightened that if they stayed around for too long, they might also be attacked? Were they frightened to touch the man in case he was dead and so lose their purity; touching a dead body made Jews ceremonially unclean and so these men could not enter the temple till they had gone through their ritual purification. For whatever reason, they walked past without stopping.

The third man, a Samaritan, was a far more controversial figure than we ever realise in our safe culture. Samaritans were hated figures by the Jews; they were of mixed race rather than pure-bred Jews; they believed part of what the Jews believed but not all of it; they had their own rival temple where they worshipped instead of in Jerusalem; there is a story of some Samaritans spreading bones in the temple in Jerusalem during a Passover season to contaminate the rival place of worship. So the Jews hated the Samaritans with a passion. So for Jesus to finish this story of love and rescue and care for a beaten-up Jew by saying that the Samaritan rescued him would be far more controversial than we will ever know.

There is no Edinburgh equivalent; there is a gang culture among some of the young people in different communities that might begin to come close to this, places where you would not want to walk alone on Friday and Saturday evenings and if you come from the rival turf, there would be no mercy; but only Glasgow's sectarian divide comes close in Scotland, where the Protestant/Catholic divide is still alive and kicking. The Middle East still has its terrible hatred between Jew and Arab and Jesus' parable reflects some of that. Under normal circumstances these people would have been sworn enemies, would have spat at one another in the street, would have been the object of one another's hatred.

What does the story teach? Jesus told the story to a man who came to ask Him a question: "*Teacher...*" (10:25) He answered his own question with a good answer: "*Love the...*" (10:27) but then it was to make sure he understood that second part that he asked another question "*And who...*" (10:29) Was he trying to confirm his own view that his neighbours were only Jews; that grace and love from God should only be shown to Jews? Was he trying to have Jesus confirm that view? He was to be in for a surprise! By telling this story Jesus is challenging this man to see that grace and love are for everyone, for the whole world and that every person in need is this man's neighbour, no matter who that person is, no matter what that person is. My neighbour is anyone in need, whether he or she lives next door, or 8000 miles away on the other side of the world.

In 2001, BBC TV ran a documentary in the QED series, about a journalist John Diamond who had just died of throat cancer. The film followed him and his family through all the ups and downs of his disease and how the family coped with it. After he had died, his wife was asked if she had any regrets. Nigella Lawson: "his friends didn't come to visit; they couldn't cope so they stayed away!" In a sense, they passed by on the other side and you might say that is understandable given the circumstances, but he was left without friends at time when he needed them most. "No Church, no Christian, can remain content with easy definitions which allow us to watch most of the world lying half-dead in the road." (Tom Wright)

When we see a need, what do we do? What I admire most about Chomno, is that he sees people in need and he does something about it. There are children whose parents have HIV being hurt, being damaged by others because stigma of disease, so Chomno has built a school. Children and single mothers are affected by trafficking and abuse and so they have decided to build a Safe Haven and it is already being built. He will tell us more about these projects this evening, but CHO is all about seeing the needs of people who are poor and helping them, meeting these needs in name of Jesus. The challenge is spelled out for us by James: "*I will...*" (2:18) "*faith without...*" (2:26) This is not showing off, nor boasting about what we do, but our faith is challenged to love and care for people in need; faith is challenged to respond in love.

This can be a costly business. Chomno often is in danger from traffickers. If we take this challenge seriously, even in own community, we might have to care for people we don't particularly like, or groups we'd not naturally find easy. That's the challenge. Someone once said that people are like a pack of porcupines on a freezing winter night. The sub-zero temperature forces the porcupines together for warmth, but as soon as they press very close, they jab and hurt one another with their spines. So they separate, only to try over and over again to huddle together. He concludes: love is painful. (David Watson *I Believe in the Church* p367) For Jesus, love meant a crown of thorns and a cross; for us it will be costly in other ways – of money, time, effort, energy, but how can we not rise to the challenge?

Here is a question to finish with. It was posed by Helmut Thielicke in his study of this parable: "To whom am I a neighbour? Who is laid at my door? Who is expecting help from me and looks on me as his neighbour?" In some ways, only you can answer that question; there will be people this week who need your help; no matter who they are, they are your neighbour, whether they live next door, or on the other side of world. Don't pass by on the other side!