

LUKE 10:25-37
CROSS-SHAPED LOVE!

Neighbours are everywhere; but what do we do with them? We are becoming a society that ignores our neighbours; we don't speak to them and they don't speak to us, except on the very rare occasions when we can't avoid it! There is the great debate about our relationship with our European neighbours, partly in the referendum, partly in our attitude to the migrants crossing Europe and the Mediterranean to come here for work; how do we welcome them? There is a variety of answers to that. We have neighbours across the world suffering in poverty: the rains have not come in Cambodia as they had hoped, and Ethiopia is facing a drought crisis – what do we do with these neighbours? Do we ignore them and pretend that they are not there? It is all very complicated and subtle, but it is a question that is not going to go away; what has the gospel to say to us about our neighbours?

What quality do we most admire in Jesus? When we ask that question, the most common answer is "His love". We most admire Jesus for His love: His love for people in need, the time He took with people, His concern for young and old; no matter who He saw in need, He loved people. What is the best demonstration of His love? The gospel tells us that the answer to that question is the cross; the cross is the place where Jesus showed the full extent of His love for us. So we are loved: "Jesus loves me, this I know; for Bible tells me so." (Anna Warner) We are loved so much that Jesus laid down His life for us; we have pictures of that love in the bread and wine of the communion service today.

The challenge of the story Jesus told about the Samaritan is for us to love others in the same way that Jesus has loved us. This is a story about values and the kind of people we are. A man came asking a question: "*What must...*" (Luke 10:25) This is one of life's big questions and people are still asking these big questions, albeit in different ways now; but we are still looking for ways to be the right kind of people, people with good values in our lives; we look in all sorts of places. Most of us are trying to have relationships with other people that add value to these relationship, looking to be good human beings, kind, helpful, and generous. The gospel takes us deeper than that, deeper than simply being nice to the people next door, to a value that is shaped by the cross; how can we love others in a cross-shaped way?

Jesus told a story of a man walking through a fairly rough place; it was hot; it was a desert road; it was a place where bandits lurk and the traveller is an easy target. It is a story remember; the traveller didn't exist. The traveller gets beaten up and two people come along and walk past; it is a story and we can speculate why they walk past, but for the story all that matters is that they walk past and that they are Jews. The Samaritan comes along and in the story Jesus gives him a good heart: "*When he...*" (Luke 10:33) Out of that 'pity', that concern, this man does something to help; for the story, the most significant thing is that he is a Samaritan: his is not a friend, he is not a nice neighbour, but a sworn enemy; that sworn enemy stopped to show love for the man in need. This is the sting in the tail of the story; the person who showed love is the sworn enemy. This is love that is cross-shaped, willing to give without thinking of the cost.

"*Which...*" (Luke 10:36f) The answer to the question is easy, but the challenge at the end is far from it! It is obvious which person in the story gets it right, but for Jesus to say "Go and do same" to the Jew who is asking all these questions is hugely difficult. He is asking a Jew to show love and mercy to a Samaritan, his enemy; this is far more than being a nice neighbour to the people next door that we just get on with; this is about loving people in need whoever they may be, even if they be our sworn enemy!

You might not have any enemies, but you get the point, surely; this is love that takes us way beyond anything that is just about being nice; this is love that challenges us to give and not to count the cost, to care for people in need wherever we see them. This is a huge challenge to us; this is cross-shaped love at its deepest.

What is the quality you most admire in yourself? We asked that question about Jesus, and now ask it about ourselves! Is it harder to answer? It is harder to be honest about ourselves! We might answer with the quality we'd like to have and be remembered for! What is the quality you most admire in yourself? Your humility? Our life, and the way we live, is built on a sense of values, the things we most aspire to have, the qualities we most aspire to be! Do you aspire to be famous? Or inspirational? Or influential? Or rich? Where does love fit into that picture? It is the top quality? Is it the one quality we have and want to have more? Paul writes to the church in Corinth about love, verses we read often at weddings; there are fifteen qualities of love; he ends by saying: "*now these...*" (1 Corinthians 13:13) Of all the qualities and values that make us human, love is the top of the list, the greatest quality and value of life, the one that holds all the others together, the glue that makes our whole life coherent.

People who love. This is all about the kind of people we are. This is not a tick box to say "I was nice to a neighbour that I can't stand today" – tick! No! Cross-shaped love is about the kind of people we are; I'm sure we get it wrong at times, but are we people who are patient, kind, generous, humble, forgiving, honest, good, trusting? This is what we most admire in Jesus; this is what we most admire in other people when we see these qualities; this is what we'd most admire in ourselves, surely. Jesus told a story that has become part of our language, but it also needs to become part of our soul, the way we live, the things we value most. Jesus loves us heart and soul, to give His life for us, with love that is cross-shaped; is that way in which we love our neighbour?

