

Who is My Neighbour?

“Who is my neighbour?” That is the seemingly reasonable question posed by the lawyer to our Lord in the Gospel reading for this coming Sunday. In response Jesus delivers one of his best-known parables, that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37).

The lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, how can he live a life that is good and acceptable to God. He answers his own question by citing the summary of the law that all Jewish people were taught: “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.” But then, trying test out Jesus further, he asks: “Who is my neighbour?” At that point Jesus does not give him the answer he clearly expects.

For the lawyer, and I rather suspect many of us too, understood “neighbours” in a narrow sense: those with whom we share much in common, those we know and like personally, those with whom we can identify.

Our Lord’s understanding, on the other hand, is much broader, as shown in the parable in which it is the Samaritan, the foreigner, who helps the man who is attacked and left for dead, not the man’s compatriots. For Jesus everyone without exception is our neighbour. We are all part of a common humanity created by God in his image and likeness. And in practice that can be very challenging to us.

In the time of our Lord’s earthly ministry there was no love loss between the Jews and the Samaritans. And we can think of many examples of animosity between different groups in our world today, and even in our own country. And often this is based on some historic event that objectively may not seem rational today.

And our Lord’s final words to the lawyer are surely addressed to us too: “Go and do likewise”. We are to follow the example of the Samaritan and show kindness to those in need whoever they may be.

If nothing else we should resist the temptation to label people, to give in to stereotypes and prejudice which only hinder the process of achieving peace and reconciliation in our world. Rather we are called to be open, and open-hearted. In that way we can reflect something, however feebly, of the love of God and share it with others.

Kingsley Boulton
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