

11 July 2010

Sunday 15C

Sermon notes:

Luke 10.25-37

## Rev Dr Craig Thompson

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"Teacher," the lawyer said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is a question you don't hear very often these days, and so in fact perhaps not a very important one to consider today, but let's take it at face value and see what happens!

As far as what it takes to win the things of God, the lawyer and Jesus seem to agree – what needs to be done is the love of God, and the love your neighbour. When the lawyer wants to argue the point on who the neighbour might be, Jesus tells that familiar story of a man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The man falls amongst thieves, and his plight is over-looked by two upright Jewish citizens. Then a Samaritan comes along – one of the hated heretics from the North - and shows that he knows what those Jews did not – that he has a responsibility to the man left naked and dying on the road.

The section of the gospel we heard this morning then seems to end with a moral lesson – go and do likewise: do for your neighbour what the Samaritan did.

We know the lesson well enough, and we speak of people who step aside from their way to help another person – particularly a person in dire need – as a Good Samaritan. We applaud such assistance being given because we know that it is often difficult or dangerous, and so it takes a special effort to go out of one's way like this.

It seems, however, that this is one of the very rare occasions where it might help to separate a piece of scripture from its scriptural context, in this case, removing the parable from the moral instruction which Jesus gives at the end.

For we must take seriously that the person who stoops to help is a *Samaritan*. Most of us know that the Samaritans were despised relatives of the Jewish people, considered little better (if any?) than the Gentiles, and so to be avoided as much as that was humanly possible. Having recognised this, it is important to note that Jesus *does not say* in response to the lawyer's question, "even Samaritans are your neighbour". Jesus *does say* "do as the Samaritan did", but his point does not seem to be that we must love the unlovely, in this case the Samaritan; at least, that is not the point of the parable by itself.

The *Samaritan* is the lover. The point of the parable is that a Jew – presumably – is assisted by one of the despised heretics from the North. And the shock arises from the likelihood that many a pious Jew – perhaps including this lawyer – might rather have died than accept such assistance.

We might put it this way: in response to the question "what must I do to inherit eternal life", Jesus effectively says, You must love God with all your heart, and welcome that it might be a Samaritan that God sends as your salvation. "Loving your neighbour as yourself" is not simply about the moral obligation we have towards others. It is about our willingness to grant that they have an obligation towards us, and that "they" might not be who we wish they were.

This brings us to another possible reading of the parable which is not moral but theological or, more precisely, christological. The point is perhaps made by reading a poem by the Uniting Church minister Bruce Prewer, entitled simply "The Samaritan".

### *"The Samaritan"*

*As I was coming home through life  
some muggers hit me hard,  
they stripped me of the things most dear  
and left me by the road.*

*A news crew found me bloodied,  
the cameras zoomed in near;  
"That's great TV" the producer said  
and left me lying there.*

*A Senator saw the camera crew  
and stood by me in the ditch:  
"Of course we'd like to help" he said,  
"but the budget will not stretch."*

*A young preacher came down that way  
and knelt to succour me.  
The muggers moved in mercilessly  
and hanged him on a tree.*

We are now not in the role of the Samaritan as the moral hero, but in the role of one in need. As fallen, broken people, we are lying beside the road somewhere, having been attacked by we-don't-really-know-what. The things we think might help us are not enough – our medicines, our therapies, our science, our politics, our economics.

Then along comes the most unlikely of helpers. What has this man Jesus to do with us? This is the real scandal of the church's talk about eternal life: that there might be Samaritans in heaven, and that our getting there might be dependent upon them. (Simply replace "Samaritan" here

with the type of person you would least like to have this role for you!)

We don't see the scandal very clearly these days because we've turned Jesus into one of us, or, if we think of him as a moral model, we aspire to become like him. *Someone else* crucified Jesus; *we* would, of course, recognise him and fall in behind as faithful disciples should he appear among us. But the New Testament as a whole casts Jesus in the role of the Samaritan, which is the meaning of his crucifixion by the good and the upright.

The lawyer asks about doing something in order to inherit eternal life. Not this story *per se*, but the New Testament as a whole, answers this: Jesus himself is the key to our life. In ordinary, every day terms, this is to say that our healing will come from those we consider Samaritans, for Jesus is not simply "one of us". If he were, it would not have been necessary to crucify him. Yet it is his very being different from us, and yet loving us, which is the source of our healing.

What must we do to inherit eternal life? Be loved by God, and loved by our neighbour. In Jesus these two things happen at once, and life in all its fullness is ours.

May God give each of us trust in the life and love of Jesus, and willingness to become the kind of lover that he was.

Amen.