

THE GOOD SAMARITAN (2019)

LK 10:25-37

Introduction

As children, from the old catechism question who is my neighbour? we used to recite the answer: 'My neighbour is all mankind without any exception of persons, even those who injure us or differ from us in religion'

St. Luke's answer to the question is the presentation of today's parable of Jesus. A lawyer had posed the legal question to Jesus. Was it a trap or was it a genuine enquiry? Having posed the original question "He tried to justify himself". He knew the Law as well as Jesus did. Our first reading for today's Mass shows this; it is from Dt 30:10-14 and expresses the content of God's Law and the attitude with which it should be observed. Were any limits possible or desirable when observing such a Law? The parable of Jesus clearly says 'no'- love of neighbour binds everyone. It goes beyond self-protection. There are no restrictions when the suffering need help. That is why the Samaritan is chosen as its best exemplar. He did what the priest and Levite did not do- he asked no questions because sympathy moved him to the utmost generosity, and he was not asking for any reward.

Background

The realism of the parable is due to the specific reference to local people and places. There existed then real Priests and Levites and Samaritans. And Jerusalem and Jericho were only 16-18 miles apart, as today. There is a lonely road, with plenty of desert to provide cover for robbers who can swoop, and rob and run. It is a down hill journey to the Dead Sea, so far below sea level and Jerusalem so far above it. Why the priest and Levite travelled alone down there is a question not discussed in the text. Jericho was a priestly city and clerics could have been going down for religious reasons. The attacked man whom they stumble on, is seen to be stripped naked. Thus he is deprived of his identity and social status; clothing is a very important marker in any world. He is abandoned, left 'half-dead'. That is the catch in the story that complicates things for the two clerics who passed by. If he is dead and they touch him, then they become impure for a while and cannot assist in cultic prayer, without being purified, or accept the tithes by which they lived.

They had to find out if he were dead, by following the suggested ritual rules governing their worship. How near could one go to the stricken man without defilement? Later rabbinic teaching declared this to be within 18 inches of the body. The clerics in the parable decide the man is dead, knowing the Law very well. The one as priest would teach it in the Temple. And the other as server at the Temple sacrifice would have known the detailed rubrics concerning liturgy. The Samaritan had only the same data available to him, and the same Law to instruct him. Anyway it would have been normal to expect him to ignore any distressed Jew in that part of the world- there was no easy commerce between Jews and Samaritans (Cf. Jn 4). But he feels sympathy and compassion at the sight of a fellow human being in distress. "Under Luke's tutelage the parable becomes *a paradigm of the compassionate vision* which is the presupposition for ethical action" (J.R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1988, p.132).

The Samaritan uses wine as an anaesthesia to cleanse the wounds, and oil to

cool the burning sensation of a bruise- “they are the elements of the daily Temple sacrifice, cf. Lev.23:13”, (Donahue, in *Ibid.* quoting Duncan Derrett, *Law in the New Testament*, p.220). Both cost money. But he puts the man on his own beast and takes him to an inn, paying two denarii for initial care for him, and assuring the innkeeper that he would incur no loss. A denarius was the daily wage of a working man in that place and time. The Samaritan promises the innkeeper that he will come back and pay whatever else is necessary later. This was important because innkeepers had a bad reputation for dishonesty, and those who could not pay debts could be thrown into prison (Cf. Mt 18:23-35). An anonymous and naked man was at his mercy, but now not to be exploited because of the Samaritan’s total care for him. Jesus in narrating the parable in this detailed way is clearly underlining the real generosity of the Samaritan, and by extension showing how shocking the Jewish clerical department was. Samaritans were hated in that Jewish world. They were of mixed race, regarded as doctrinally heterodox, liturgically disastrous, and sexually immoral. Everything was wrong with them. That would be clear so long as you were not the opportunistic person doing business with them, or the person who fell among robbers and was left for half-dead! That, of course, is Jesus' point.

Conclusion

The parable highlights a fundamental disposition about doing what is humanly right. It does not solve specific problems. For instance in our world today: what about immigrants? Nationally and internationally what is the best procedure? Or when we think of problems associated with death, how decide when someone is dead- with moral security? When Dr Barnard did the first heart transplant, was the donor really dead? It is disputed.

Compassionate love cannot be limited by the safeguards of custom or law. We need the realism of history to show us that self-sacrificial love is practicable. What Jesus asked for he did; what was asked of his most faithful disciples eventually they did. Had we not had some real experience of this kind of love in our own lives how could we go on believing and professing our faith? Is it not true that all of us have in our own time of great need been helped by a good Samaritan? Selflessness stimulates us and fidelity reassures us. Our presence here at Mass shows our willingness to want to be like Our Lord. We want to share his life with fellow believers who can be competent, faithfully committed, community minded and compassionate.

We see the difficulties that Pope Francis is running into in dealing with moral issues; between love and law there should be no conflict. We need help in deciding major moral issues. There is never an easy solution in specific cases. A happy Sunday to you all.

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