

St Edmundsbury Cathedral
14th July 2019
Year C – 4th Sunday after Trinity
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
The Parable of The Good Samaritan

May I speak in the name of the one who loves me, who sustains me and who gives me life. Amen.

The sense of relief is almost palpable. The new curate is preaching her first sermon on the parable of The Good Samaritan. We know that one — learned it as children. She'll know that one. Together we can think about those who walk on by. About how important it is not to be so preoccupied by our religion that we fail to notice what's going on around us. We might even commend one another for the good we do to others!

I wonder if that's really a helpful place to start with such a familiar parable? Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine points out that as the story began to unfold, those listening to Jesus might also have been feeling quite comfortable as they tuned in to the gradual and gentle revealing of their familiar threefold heritage... a Priest of the line of Aaron.... a Levite from the family of Jacob and..... a Samaritan.... Just a minute! No!...Israelite it should be Israelite... surely it's Priest, Levite and Israelite — Jews know their lineage...a Jew simply is one of the three!¹

But instead we hear Jesus tell the story of a Priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. At the time, a priest or Levite failing to stop would have been utterly unremarkable to a Jewish audience — shocking to our ears and in our time... but then? With very specific purity laws, no great surprise.

The surprise comes when, as Amy-Jill goes on to suggest, we realise that the dissonance caused in the ears of the Jewish listener is akin to a Christian's jarred reaction to hearing their familiar threefold heritage revealed as: The Father, The Son and The Devil.

I can see the fidgeting... I can hear the sharp intakes of breath. The discomfort. My heart's racing... I wonder.... Does the story-teller now have our full attention?

Can it really be that in this parable Jesus demands our full attention in such a shocking way simply to tell us that we should all be kind to anyone in need? I mean, even 'good' Samaritans are kind. And Christians hardly hold the monopoly on kindness....

In this first century context, Samaritans were the enemy... not the marginalised, but the enemy. In the Gospel just two weeks ago we heard how the apostles wanted fire to rain down from heaven because Samaritans would not allow Jesus to rest among them. For a quiet life, Samaria, the place and its people was to be avoided... the Samaritan woman at the well.... there alone. And much less trouble was likely if you walked the longer route when travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee.... you can see this clearly in maps of the period... geographically Samaria is surrounded by Jewish lands.

Samaritans were the enemy embedded deeply within the heart of the people of Israel.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School — lecture delivered to members of the Council of Christians and Jews, London, May 2019

And so we hear this story... 'The parable of an encounter with the one whom we have been trying to avoid'... Perhaps we might also entitle it 'the parable of the person in the ditch'....
For that's where Jesus begins this story.... with a person in the ditch... stripped and beaten.... wounded... half dead.

Not dead.... half dead.... half alive, in fact.

'The parable of the one who is half alive.'

Is this why our full attention is required? Because it is a matter of life and death?

Is it really that an encounter with the enemy, an encounter with that which we have been trying to avoid that brings the possibility of life?

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy and whilst the role of '*good*' Samaritan may seem aspirational, perhaps first we need to attend to that bit of ourselves that is lying in the ditch... beyond hope, without life and left for dead.... maybe there is something deep within to be brought out into the light. Perhaps there's a situation or a someone or a behaviour that has power over us which seems to prevent us from living. Perhaps we know there's a need to confront a painful reality...

to engage with 'the other'.... to engage with that which has become so deeply embedded within the heart of who we are and how we live that we might need others to notice it for us... especially if we are too busy taking the long way around, trying to avoid it...

Instead of keeping our heads down for the sake of a quiet life...muddling through and coping from day to day... how much more alive might we be.... might our neighbours and communities be.... might the world be.... if we found the courage to encounter the enemy before we find ourselves half dead in the ditch... choosing to make the enemy our neighbour by daring to challenge and to overturn the causes of idolatry, of strife, of jealousy and anger, quarrels, dissensions and factions?

Imagine for a moment the most deplorable person or situation your prejudice your politics or your experience might conjure up. Whether it's global climate change and fractured political systems or your own personal enemies... responding to that image is a hard task. Exhausting and bruising. As is speaking out for those without a voice, growing in self-awareness and paying constant attention to our responses and actions. By showing to ourselves and to others something of the mercy that God shows to us we might begin to accept and love the works in progress that we are. Thy kingdom come... one day at a time.

If this is the parable of an encounter with the one whom we've been trying to avoid...contrast the picture you just imagined with an image of the spiritual wrestling that takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane — 'remove from me this cup'... Jesus cries.... only to drink from that very same cup... it is through this encounter with the enemy deep within that offers us all the possibility of life.

For you, Lord, prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

A table around which we will shortly gather.

Here, Lord, you have my love and my full attention.

For here is life. And life in all its fullness.

Revd. Sarah Geileskey
Cathedral Curate