

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Fourth Sunday of Trinity (Sea Sunday)

13th July 2025

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Sermon by the Revd Canon Katy Cunliffe

Today's Gospel gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's a familiar story: a beaten and robbed man is left for dead at the side of the road; the priest and the Levite walk by on the other side while the Samaritan stops to help. And we know the meaning, don't we? Even those who have never been to church know the meaning of this story because the Good Samaritan is ingrained into our culture and society.

To be a good Samaritan is shorthand for helping once a week at the soup kitchen or doing some shopping for your elderly neighbours. There are hospitals, helplines, charities and civic awards named after the Good Samaritan. In her Christmas speech in 2004 the late Queen Elizabeth used the story to remind us that "everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour, and the need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences."

And, of course, that's true. And yes, helping people, including those who are different us, is a good thing to do. On this Sea Sunday we think particularly of how we might help Seafarers, upon whom we all depend, and who work in what are very often dangerous and lonely conditions, spending months away from their families, facing issues of isolation, loneliness, piracy, limited access to external communication, and finding themselves arriving in new and unknown lands.

One way in which we help and support them is by supporting the work of the Mission to Seafarers through both prayer and action; and so later in today's service members of the Mothers Union will be bringing forward and offering gifts that they have collected and which will be passed on to the Mission to Seafarer Chaplaincy at Felixstowe Docks; and there will also be an additional, retiring collection for the Mission to Seafarers at the end of today's service.

But as important as that is, and as good as it is to help others, I think the parable of the Good Samaritan is challenging us rather more than that. So let's try to put aside what we think we know about this story, what we think it means, and come to it afresh. Let's strip away two thousand years of well-intended domestication and consider this parable as a first-century short story spoken by a Jew, Jesus, to other Jews.

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“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the Lawyer asks Jesus. “Love God and love your neighbour” Jesus replies. ‘No problem’, thinks the lawyer! And so might we. We love God – we come to church, we worship, we pray. And we love our neighbour: we try to be kind to people, we donate to the foodbank, we give money to charity. We can do loving God and loving neighbour. It’s nice and warm and cosy.

But the lawyer doesn’t leave it there. He asks another question, “who is my neighbour?” And this is where things take a rather uncomfortable, challenging and disturbing turn. The lawyer no doubt thought he knew the answer to this question. According to Jewish law, your neighbour – the ones you were responsible for loving - were those who were part of your own community, your own people, as well as what the Old Testament refers to as ‘aliens in your land’ – those who are not part of your own people but who live among you nonetheless.

So when Jesus responds to the question by telling the story of the Good Samaritan the whole status quo is disrupted. Everything the lawyer thought he knew about the law is called into question. Because this story is about so much more than being kind and helpful to those in need. This story challenges every understanding of who our neighbour is. Of whom we are required to love.

First the Priest and Levite come and walk by on the other side of the road – their purpose in the story simply being to prepare the way for the third person to come. You see, for a Jewish audience, a Priest and a Levite were always followed by an Israelite. In much the same way that if I said, ‘Father, Son and ... ‘ you’d know that Holy Spirit came next. Or if I said ‘There was an Englishman, a Scotsman and an ... ‘ you’d know I’m probably about to tell a joke about an Irishman. There was a Priest, a Levite and ... an Israelite, is what they would have been expecting. And, what’s more, the third person to come usually succeeds where the first two fail. So for Jesus’ audience, the priest comes and fails to help; the Levite comes and fails to help; they will be expecting the next person to be an Israelite and they will be expecting them to help, to be the hero of the story.

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However, instead of the anticipated Israelite, the person who stops to help – the hero of the story - is a Samaritan. The enemy.

It's difficult for us to appreciate just how shocking this would have been. In my curacy church in Manchester, which looked out onto the Etihad football stadium, Manchester City's home ground, I might have tried to illustrate it with an analogy of a United fan coming to the rescue of a City fan, or vice versa! But even that doesn't come close.

To keep the setting in modern day Samaria, which is in the northern part of what we call the West Bank today, this is the Israeli being helped by the Palestinian, or vice versa. Or it's the Ukrainian being helped by a Russian soldier. Our neighbour isn't simply those who are of a different faith, or from a different place, or those we don't know, or those we don't like very much. Our neighbour is our absolute enemy.

Think of the person or the people you despise more than anyone else – perhaps because of something they've done; perhaps because of their views. *They* are your neighbour. *They* are the ones to whom Jesus tells us we should show mercy. *They* are the ones we are to love. Loving God and loving our neighbour is not so nice and warm and cosy now. It is challenging and disturbing.

But just imagine what would happen if the Russian soldiers took care of the wounded Ukrainians? Imagine what would happen if the Palestinians took care of the Israelis and vice versa? Imagine what would happen if we each were able to care for our enemy, whoever that may be? If we were each able to bind up the others' wounds, to show mercy to those who have hurt us or those with whom we profoundly disagree. Imagine what would happen if each one of us *really* loved God and loved our neighbour.

So yes, absolutely, let's support the work of the Mission to Seafarers, let's give to charity and help those in need. But let us also be challenged and disturbed by the Good Samaritan. And, as Jesus says, let us go and do likewise. Amen.