

The Good Samaritan

Date: 27 December 2020
Location: St George's Battery Point
Texts: Luke 10:25-37; Romans 13:8-10

Today we're starting a new series looking at Jesus' parables in Luke's gospel, and we kick off with perhaps Jesus most famous parable - The Good Samaritan. It's so famous the phrase has entered our vocabulary and the moral compass of Western society. The Queen referred to Good Samaritans in her Christmas speech - that ideal of helping strangers in need. That fame however raises a problem. the problem of familiarity. The story is so well known, how are we to feel it's power again? To help us get into the story with fresh eyes, I'm enlisting 2 artists: the Dutch Catholic Rembrandt, and the French symbolist Gustav Moreau.

Rembrandt – 1638 – Remembering the parable



So, Rembrandt's take from 1638.

Rembrandt is one of my favourite painters, but I have to say this is not one of his finest works. But sitting with it he does help us meditate on the parable.

The first thing we notice is that the painting is set at the last scene in the story. The Samaritan has arrived at the inn. He's speaking with the innkeeper. It seems he's negotiating the price of their stay. A burly man, perhaps from the inn, is straining to lift the injured man from what looks like a horse, rather than a donkey. The injured man is pale, no

doubt from the trauma he has suffered. Another man holds the horse patiently. The setting seems to be that of tranquil village life – there's a woman at the well and two chickens scuttle past it. Only the bandage on the head of the semi-naked man tells of the violence that had led up to this point.

But there is one last figure, in the window on the right, just within the frame. He gazes out on the scene before him. Is he simply a guest looking on, wondering what events have led up to this point? What has happened to the man on the horse? Who is his benefactor? As he wonders, we too are invited to recall the parable.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.

The man, the priest and the Levite, were all headed from Jerusalem to Jericho. Was the Samaritan headed the same way? Perhaps they are all staying at the same inn? **Could the man in the window be the priest or the Levite?** We can imagine him looking out and seeing this Samaritan – his clothes give him away – arriving with this injured man, the man he had passed by on the road.

“So, he was alive after all”, he says to himself. “Well, I’m glad. I would have helped him if I had known.”

“But you didn’t, did you?”

“No, but what if he was dead? I’d have been defiled. And in any case, who knows whether he’s a Jew or not. We’re only commanded to help our brothers after all. He wasn’t my responsibility. Better a man who’s unclean anyway take the risk.”

“You won’t even say the Samaritan, *helped* him.”

So the man goes on, justifying himself. And we wonder, **does the man in the window stand for the Scribe to whom Jesus tells the parable?** He looks in on the story from the outside. Or is it from the inside? The figure is inside the inn, there are others attending to the injured man. Will he go and help this man who will be his fellow guest, his neighbour? Or will he remain unmoved by what he has seen? Will he keep trying to justify himself?

What would it have been like to be this Scribe, hearing Jesus’ parable? His question to Jesus doesn’t come from a genuine heart. He stands and challenges the teacher, rather than sitting at Jesus’ feet to learn. He thinks he can earn an inheritance, rather than receiving it as a gift. But Jesus will not be drawn in. Instead he draws out what is in the Scribe’s heart.

But let’s return to the figure in the window one last time. **Does he stand for us,** those looking at the painting? We who hear not just Jesus’ parable, but also its context – that Jesus told this parable to the Scribe who wanted to justify himself. And so the question comes to us – will we be a neighbour? Will we show mercy? Will we go and do likewise? We who know the full story of the gospel. We who

know the full extent of the mercy God has shown us. Rembrandt gives us a hint of the bigger picture in a detail we skipped over earlier. It's there on the left – a woman at the well. I wonder whether Rembrandt wants us to recall that other Samaritan story, in John 4, where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, and she finds in him the living water of salvation. In John's gospel, it is only the Samaritans who name Jesus as saviour of the world.

Does Rembrandt want us to recall Jesus' critique of the Pharisees and Scribes? That, *'It's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.'* Luke (5.31-32)

I wonder whether he is asking us, will you be like the Scribe?

Like the Pharisee in Luke 7, instead of loving our neighbour do we judge and so deny the grace we have received?

'If this man were a prophet he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner' 7.39

But Jesus said, *'Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.'* 7.47

What sort of excuses do we make up to avoid loving our neighbours?

How do we try to justify ourselves?

Are we so busy that we ignore those in need whom we come across? Are there neighbours who are just invisible to us? Who are our neighbours that we want to pass by?

Gustav Moreau – 1870 – The ethical imperative



To help us feel the force of this parable the symbolist painter Gustav Moreau makes an astonishing connexion. Traditionally the Samaritan in the story has been identified with Jesus, which I'm convinced is right. But Moreau takes things in a different direction. Do you see it? In his vision it is not the Samaritan but the stricken man who is like Christ. The robe draped over the naked man, his prone figure, bowed head, and arms splayed out all recall images of Christ as he is taken down from the cross. The severe landscape suggests the creation itself rising up to assault its maker. I think Moreau has picked up on another of Jesus' parables and linked it to the Good Samaritan,

namely that of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Do you remember Jesus' words?

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.

Both Rembrant and Moreau in their own ways confront us with the ethical challenge of this parable: Will I love my neighbour as myself?

But where can we find the resources to do this? Where can we find the resources even to love our enemies? The answer lies in something that both Rembrant and Moreau have missed. Where in the parable do we find the Scribe, to whom it is addressed? Our first thought is that he is either the priest or the Levite. Yet he is neither. Nor is he the innkeeper, or even the Samaritan. No, the Scribe is the man waylaid upon the way. He is the one naked, broken, helpless and close to death. You see even as this parable is a picture of the command to 'Love your neighbour as yourself' it is also picture of the gospel. That is the secret spiritual power of this parable that gives the resources to live out its ethical command. The Scribe is the one who is sick and in need of a doctor. He is the sinner in need of forgiveness. And we stand with him. In our helplessness, in our brokenness, lying at death's door, Jesus meets us. He comes to his own, but his own reject him. He is the outsider, despised and rejected by the very one he meets upon the way. And even to this one he reaches down in compassion; even toward those who nailed him to the tree he stretches out his arms in love; even to us, who fail him, who sin against him, he extends his hands in grace. He is our neighbour. You see it's only as we see our helplessness, it's only as we see the grace of the Lord Jesus to us, it's only here that we will find the resources to live this parable and to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The image of the Good Samaritan is something that the church has given to Western society, but who in the story do people see us as? The good Samaritan? Or the priest and Levite? Do we actually live out this parable so that when people think of a good Samaritan they think of us? Are we, to use Paul's words in Titus (2.10), 'making the teaching of God our Saviour beautiful' by loving our neighbours? This is a task for each of us individually in our own lives. It's only as the church lives this parable that all the bad press that the Church gets with paedophile priests, and prosperity preachers, that bad press that we have to wear; it's only as the our churches as communities of grace live out this parable to the watching world that people will be able to see past that bad press to the one to whom the parable points, the one to whom we are to point.

What does it look like in practice? It is something we do together as a community of grace. There's lots of opportunities with agencies who exist to live this story out. Talk with Pip or Clare about Mission Australia or Charlotte about Anglicare. It's something I'd love to see us grow in as a church. But what I do want to say to you personally, today, is:

Take some time to reflect. Who is the neighbour that I'm neglecting who needs God's compassion? Set it in your heart to pray for that person regularly. Plan how you might reach out to them in compassion. And ask God to open your heart so that you might see the world as he does; ask him to give you his heart of compassion; ask him to remind that you only stand because of the grace of Christ, so that your first movement toward others is always one of grace and so that you may be open and ready to act when you meet the stranger on the way.

The secular image of the Good Samaritan is that of the promise of shared humanity. It's a promise that so often fails. The true secret of this parable is that of God sharing our humanity. In Christ God is our neighbour. That is the reality that will empower us to love our neighbours, even our enemies.