

It's difficult to look at something as well known as the story of the Good Samaritan with fresh eyes, but it's the parts of the Bible that have been the most used through the centuries that have been the most distorted. In the case of parable of the Good Samaritan, years of use have turned a shocking, profound statement of the Christian life into something considerably less. Let's look at today's Gospel carefully, then, to see what the writer of Luke really had in mind.

The first thing you notice is that the parable doesn't stand alone. Jesus had a specific purpose in mind when he told it. A lawyer had stood up to test him. To understand this, we have to get away from our notions of what a lawyer is. In Jesus' time, to be a lawyer was to be a Bible expert. The Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, was the law, and lawyers were used to interpret how the laws of Moses could be applied to everyday life.

As an expert on biblical law, this lawyer figured he would trap an uneducated Nazarene peasant in legal debate. He asked Jesus how one can gain eternal life in the kingdom to come at the end of times. You can imagine the lawyer sitting back smugly ready to attack Jesus on some fine points of the law.

But Jesus was much too clever for him: he quizzed the lawyer, What is written in the law? Of course, the lawyer jumped on this chance to show off what he knew and responded by giving a formula that he had memorised: "You have to love the Lord your God with all your heart/soul/strength/mind, and love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus said, "Yep, you've got it right; now, go do it!" "Now, wait a minute," thought the lawyer. "How did he get me to answer my own question?" He can't very well attack the answer he himself gave, so he thought he would have to try something else.

This time, he pulled a politician's trick: he picked out a controversial issue, thinking that Jesus would be forced to one side or the other. Either way, he would alienate some of his followers. The lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbour?" At issue here was whether Jews were to love and serve all people or only fellow Jews. Jesus could not simply ask him what the law said on this issue because the law was ambivalent. On the one hand, there were many instances in the Bible where the people of Israel were called to hate and destroy their enemies. But there were also many places in the Old Testament (like the book of Jonah) where all people were viewed as God's children and must be treated accordingly.

Jesus answered the lawyer with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The next preconception we have to rid ourselves of before we can look at this parable with fresh eyes is its title. Passages in the Bible were not titled by their authors. These titles were added much later when the Bible came to be printed and widely distributed. Just as the parable of the prodigal son is not about the prodigal son but, rather, about his older brother who refuses to forgive him, this parable is not really about the good Samaritan.

The first person introduced, the man going from Jerusalem to Jericho, is the main character of the story. We are to look at the action of the story through his eyes. Because we're told nothing about him, we know that we're to see ourselves in him. We are to see ourselves falling into hands of robbers: stripped/beaten/left for dead. The land between Jerusalem and Jericho is primarily desert

and rocky ground that drops 3,300 feet in eighteen miles. And it is here, in this desolate country, that the story takes place.

And then, miraculously, we are to be saved! Here comes a priest. He sees us... and passes by on the other side of the road. We are surely doomed. If even a priest won't help us in our current state, we are lost, indeed.

But, look. Someone else comes; a Levite this time: not quite as holy as a priest but still a descendant of Levi and an important, if secondary, figure in temple life. But he, too, passes to the other side and walks on. It's obvious that we are to die here.

Finally, a third figure approaches. But what hope have we of being saved if church leaders are afraid to help us? In a final cruel irony, the third figure isn't even an ordinary Jew: he's a Samaritan. Pilgrims who passed through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem did so at peril of their lives. Why would a Samaritan stop when pious Jews would not? But he does stop, and he cares for us and sees to our recovery. This is the shock of the story that has been lost through the centuries: an enemy has stopped to help when church-going fellow countrymen did not.

It's not that this Samaritan was special: he was not meant to represent Jesus, for instance, as is sometimes thought. We're all capable of doing what he did. The Samaritan did not befriend his enemy; there was no mention that any relationship occurred between them. The Samaritan provided for the man's needs and then went back to his life's work. He would settle up the bill the next time he came through, presumably when the man was long gone. So, this Samaritan isn't Jesus: he was simply a man doing what Jesus would have done.

The lawyer was made to view the situation from the ditch, and from that vantage point he saw that what defined a neighbour was neither geographical nor ethnic. Neighbours are not necessarily those who held the same religious views as we do; they're not just those people we like. From the perspective of the ditch, a neighbour is anyone who pulls you out: even if that person is a despised enemy.

Jesus moved from a passive definition of neighbour (one who receives help) to an active one (anyone who gives help). The lawyer's question was changed from "Who is worthy of my love?" to "How can I be a good neighbour?" Jesus' answer to this was simple. Love your neighbour as yourself: if you were in the ditch, what would you want done? Go, and do likewise to others.

I was in a car park near St Paul's Cathedral was rushing to my car because I had to get back to Brunswick as quickly as possible for an appointment when someone yelled out, "Excuse me, could you help me?" I am sorry to say that at that time I had become so accustomed to people asking for money in that part of town that I just hurried on. I said over my shoulder, "I'm sorry, I really don't have time." The woman replied, "You don't even know what I need!" Oops, I stopped with my hand on my car door and turned back to her. It turned out that her battery was dead, and she had leads and needed a jump start. A few minutes later, we were both on the road, and I felt pretty ashamed. Who is the neighbour? The one who helps out: me and you, all of us. How should we treat our neighbours? Like we ourselves would wish to be treated. It's pretty simple, really... but awfully hard at the same time.

Fr Robert