



# *Fifth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 10 July 2022

### READINGS

Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

## *The Good Samaritan: Go and do likewise*

I'm sure most of us can interpret today's Gospel passage, the parable of the Good Samaritan, or we've been taught about it at some stage of our lives. As I share some reflections on this passage, I pray that we will find ourselves within this story in new and unexpected ways.

Jesus didn't invent the literary genre of parables. He told them as part of a tradition that was familiar throughout the Ancient Mediterranean world. We are reminded that parables don't require us fix on the certainty of one meaning. They are also disruptive, inviting us to see the world in new ways. They question us, and ask us to question ourselves and our certainties about life and about God.

Stories such as parables use stereotypes, patterns and exaggeration to act like a mirror. If we allow them to, we can see ourselves through someone else's eyes and look at the world from a different perspective. In this way, parables have the power to bring about a change of mind, and a change of heart.

It is appropriate therefore that this story is told in response to a question. A teacher of the law asks Jesus how best to fulfil the law. His first question focuses on what he must do, and he knows the perfect answer: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and, "Love your neighbour as yourself."

It is his second question that becomes tricky, and Luke says the man asked it because he wanted to justify himself: "Who is my neighbour?" This second question is not about doing but about being. We might recognise it as a question about belonging: who is "in"; who is one of "us"? It comes with the assumption that I am "in" because it defines the world in relation to me. I am the centre of my own story and need to categorise my neighbour.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not only a story about being kind to everybody and understanding that each person in the world, friend or enemy, stranger or companion, is your neighbour – someone you are called to love. It is that, and more.

I would like to suggest two things that the parable shifts for the listeners. Firstly, through the story, Jesus redefines the world in relation to the lawyer. Secondly, Jesus' questions move the lawyer between doing and being, and back to doing again. These two world-shifting ideas are found in the last line of the parable, "Go and do likewise." Jesus ends with an instruction that is really quite shocking. The one who did right is the Samaritan. Go and do what your enemy did – be like him. The lawyer must question his status, how he identifies himself and how that has shaped how he sees the world and how he moves and acts in it. Jesus' answer shatters his assumptions and is a humbling moment of truth telling.

See your enemy? Go and be like him.

Jesus tells the story as a Jewish teacher to a Jewish audience in a Jewish context. We know that in the time when Jesus lived, a Samaritan would be considered the enemy of a Jew, even though they both

shared the land of Palestine and were each other's nearest neighbours. Being separate was part of the law, understood and taught as necessary to preserve the heritage and lineage of the Jews. I am acutely aware today that we tell this story and hear this reflection in the context of many forms of xenophobia here in South Africa and around the world. The experiences of migrants and refugees makes this Jew and Samaritan situation not so far removed from us. We must hold that experience and those human stories in our hearts and minds as we contemplate the meaning of the parable for us.

Jesus is not simply saying, "The Samaritan is your neighbour." He's saying "Look at it differently". If the instruction "Go and act like your enemy did," turned the audience's world upside down, it also invites us to look at our world differently and to question ourselves.

We might like to place ourselves in the story in the role of the Samaritan – the hero, the one who gets it right and shows mercy. But that's not necessarily real, and if it were real, it would be doubly challenging and humbling, because we'd be putting ourselves, not in the role of helpful hero, but of someone who is on the margins. It is not something that we easily choose to do, and it shifts how we see our world and how we define what it means to belong.

To enter the story in different ways requires us to resist identifying with only one character when we ask, "Who should I be like?" In the days ahead, I invite us all to retell the story with ourself in all the different roles and to see our own actions and potential in all of them.

The lawyer might have wanted to see himself as the priest or the Levite. We probably also do, because we tend to be a bit self-righteous, not questioning our certainty that we are right and justified in what we do. Theologian Bruce Epperly notes that the parable doesn't condemn the religious leaders; it just shows that they believed that they had better things to do than to help a wounded pilgrim. They were doing their duties and following the rules for their professions. The Temple needed to be cared for and services led. Religious order needed to be maintained. For them, this was more important. It prevented them from responding to obvious human need.

I think sometimes we become hard-hearted and blind to the suffering of others, because we have "REASONS"... good reasons. Like the priest and Levite, we are busy, we need to guard our sense of our religious purity, we cross the road for fear, we argue about our own safety, and all of these things might be valid, but when are our reasons only excuses? Do we expect better behaviour from others, while we let ourselves off the hook?

We can also retell the story point of view another character. What about being the one beaten up on the side of the road – the victim? What shifts for me if I tell this story from the perspective of me, for example, being the one left on the side of the road with no one caring whether I live or die? Hopefully the scenario is not literal, but in any community it is really tough to be the one who needs help, and it's really hard to accept that help.

If the victim in this story could have chosen, the Samaritan was also probably the last person he would have wanted to have showing him any kindness. It would have been humbling for him to have been so at the mercy of this man – both stranger and enemy.

As I end this reflection, I want us to enter the story in the role of the Samaritan to imagine the cost to him of being a neighbour. His act of mercy came at personal cost on many levels. What about his own identity: as a Samaritan helping an enemy, he might be tempted to ask, "Would this man ever have helped me if the roles were reversed?"

There's also the physical risk – no guarantee that the bandits aren't still in the area. There's the cost of his time. The cost of his reputation among his peers. There's the question of the money he paid and his offer to return and settle the account. And more. Compassion costs. It requires us to care and to follow up.

When Jesus concludes with the words: go and do likewise, he is not only saying to the lawyer "Do this," he is saying "See the world like this". Love of God and love of neighbour will turn human values and judgements upside down so that we no longer use the same categories that divide us, and we no longer see the world in the same way.

We can leave after the service, like the traveller going from Jerusalem, our place of worship, to Jericho, our everyday life, without being troubled or disrupted by this story. Or we can ask ourselves some honest questions which we take with us on the journey, allowing us to revisit the story and ask the questions it asks.

Bear with me as I close with some questions to consider. Perhaps some will stand out for you as they do for me:

When and where have I been left, beaten and broken on the side of the road?

Whom have I left discarded, broken on the side of the road?

Who has been cast aside by my need to be right or better?

When was the last time I went out of my way to avoid helping someone in need?

When did I turn my head away?

When did I try to justify myself or rationalise my excuses?

When did I think I was the hero or the one in the right, when in fact I was looking through the wrong lens?

Where can I extend mercy, even in places it is unexpected?

In what ways is Jesus telling me, "Go and do likewise"?