

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

It's always a sign of mixed success when a proper name becomes a common noun. In America, for example, we make photocopies on a Xerox machine; if we need a facial tissue, we will ask for a Kleenex. Here in the UK, I've noticed that when we tidy up, we'll get out the Hoover. There are many other examples I imagine we could cite. I am led to believe that executives are wary of this tendency though, because as these proper names come to apply to all sorts of things then they end up not meaning very much and the specific benefits of, say, a Hoover vacuum, are lost in the shuffle.

It seems to me that the term 'Samaritan' is quite similar to this, and that the story that Jesus told in our gospel reading for this morning has become so popular and well-known that the very pressure of the story on the meaning of the word 'Samaritan' has caused it to mean something else. For example, do a web search for 'Samaritan' today and you will be linked with Samaritan's Purse, Samaritan Ministries, Samaritan Hospital, and a confidential counselling service by the name of the Samaritans. This certainly speaks of a great success for this story. These are good organisations doing valuable work, and they have taken their name from the one who showed mercy in this morning's reading.

But friends the risk is that if we just allow 'Samaritan' to mean 'someone prone to helping another' then we might miss hearing some of the surprise in this story. The story of the Good Samaritan has, for good reason, been so well loved over the last two millennia that our familiarity with it might stop us from also noticing its strangeness, and we might miss some of the depth and the challenge present here. So I propose this morning that we linger over a few of the details from this reading, to better grasp it, to better love it, and most of all, to be better grasped by the love we find in it.

Perhaps the first thing to notice is that, unlike in Matthew and Mark, it is not Jesus but the lawyer who says what we have come to know as the great commandment, to love God and love your neighbour as yourself. This is not altogether surprising: both elements of this come from the Old Testament, and indeed rough contemporaries of Jesus such as Rabbi Hillel said similar things. But the effect in this context then is to lay the emphasis not on the teaching to love as such, but on Jesus' answer to the lawyer's second question: 'who is my neighbour?' This question becomes the overriding focus of this entire passage, and Jesus' response to it sheds ample light on both loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself.

'Who is my neighbour?' the lawyer wants to vindicate himself to the teacher, wants to show his cleverness, wants to manage his responsibility. And who is my neighbour? The way the lawyer asks this question puts him in the driver's seat. He is in control. He is the one who loves. He is the one who decides if another person is truly his neighbour or not. This is *his* game. With his question to Jesus, he's just trying to estimate the size of the pitch and identify his teammates.

In answer to this question, then, Jesus' story becomes quite odd indeed. One of the two main characters, the man set upon by robbers, is passive and unconscious for virtually all of the story, left half dead in a ditch. He doesn't even have a speaking part. We know almost nothing about him other than that he is most likely an Israelite, like the lawyer. And we know that throughout this story he is passive, exposed, vulnerable. In answering the lawyer's

question, Jesus effectively turns it on its head: who is my neighbour? Is not a question that we answer out of our own power, by our own decision, through our own control. Determining who our neighbour is is not a matter of carefully vetting likely candidates and finding some who are really worth bothering with. No; in the event, our neighbour is who we are given.

And *what* a neighbour this man is given. A priest and a Levite both see the man, half-dead, and pass by on the other side of the road. These fellow Israelites are most likely afraid that this man is not half dead but all dead, and in that case coming into contact with him would render them unclean. So his countrymen and co-religionists pass him by. Instead, a Samaritan comes upon him and helps.

Now here is where we ought to be careful and try to bracket out our contemporary notions about Samaritans. To an Israelite of Jesus' day, a Samaritan would have been repugnant. There had been hatred and animosity between the Jews and Samaritans for centuries, as the Israelites held the Samaritans to be idolaters and betrayers of the faith. And the Samaritans gave as good as they got. Roughly 25 years before Jesus would have told this parable, a group of Samaritans entered the Temple in Jerusalem and scattered human bones around, desecrating the place. In our story today, once the Samaritan comes on the scene, the lawyer most likely would have thought that he would come upon the half-dead Israelite and finish the job. To the lawyer, the Samaritan's help would have been shocking, even scandalous. And that, of course, is just why Jesus used him in the story in the first place.

What's more, the help that the Samaritan gives is extravagantly over the top. He doesn't just give first aid, but takes him to an inn. He gives the innkeeper an amount of money that, at that time, would have sustained a person for three weeks. And he doesn't even stick around for a thank you. In fact, there is no sense at all that this half-dead Israelite ever even knows who saved his life.

In response to the lawyer trying to screen who his neighbours are, Jesus tells a story of an Israelite who is exposed and vulnerable and who is helped, extravagantly, by someone who would normally be considered a mortal enemy. Our neighbour is not who we choose; our neighbour is who we are given. It is in light of this, then, that we can go back and understand the teaching about loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbour as ourselves.

Who is our neighbour? Suddenly, in the logic of the parable, we're not calling the shots; we are not so sure just who our neighbour is. Suddenly we're not so sure just who our self is. If I'm to love another as my 'self' then the upshot is that I'm not even totally familiar with who I am, as I seem constantly to find that self facing me in others. And here we find the most radical challenge, for in this we see that no boundary will finally stand in the way of us and our neighbour, if we are to love them as our self. There are certainly distinctions: yes; love doesn't seek to make everything else the same. But boundaries? No. There are no boundaries to our neighbours, no limits to whom we are to find our very selves in, no restrictions to whom we are to love unstintingly in God.

Sisters and brothers, in this day of the internet, international travel, and globalisation the world seems to grow smaller; it is clearer now more than ever that any line we draw to limit our neighbours will simply be arbitrary. And so we discover that we have neighbours far and near: your family who sits at the dinner table with you, the young woman across the

counter at Caffè Nero, the Baptist or the Muslim or the atheist who lives down the street, the unemployed young man who lives across town, the politician we disagree with so ardently, even the worker in a different country who picked the fruit you ate with breakfast or who sewed the shirt you're wearing right now. Who is my neighbour, who I am to love? Who *isn't* my neighbour?

We might even be surprised to find, in fact, that God is our neighbour. That's not to parrot the words of that song from the nineties that God might be 'one of us'. What I mean is that the story of the Good Samaritan is also a parable of God's grace. The man who is half-dead and abandoned, who is unable to do anything on his own encounters a freely given and extravagant healing love from a surprising source, without conditions. This love gives him back his life and allows him to be a neighbour to others. This is the mercy and love of God that we meet through Christ, and that empowers us to love our neighbour. And so here we find that love of God and love of neighbour meet.

We don't love God because it is a commandment. It is 'written in the Law' because God loves us first. God's love elicits love from us. We respond to that love with love; and we find that even the love we respond with is a gift from God. This responding love is then worked out in loving our neighbour. Loving God and loving neighbour are not two different projects, for love begets love. The love we receive is the love that we love those around us with; and it is with that same love that we graciously receive from our neighbour, who is also beloved of God.

We know how the lawyer in today's story answered Jesus' question, but we don't know what he did after that. Was his life changed? Did he 'go and do likewise'? Or was he so turned off that he went and looked for a different venue to plead his case in? Or did he, perhaps like most of us, walk away convinced that Jesus was right, yet also knowing how far he was from it, nevertheless trying to love others with the love that he had found in Christ? Of course, we can only speculate about him. But I hope that as we go out in the wake of this story we will be both challenged and comforted by what we find here: by the surprising Samaritan, by the neighbour in our life we do not choose but are given by God, and most of all by the extravagant love and grace of God. In that way, may we better grasp this story, better love this story, and above all, be better grasped by the love we find in it. *Amen.*