

Sermon: The Good Samaritan

Intro/

I wonder what your favourite stories are?

When I was growing up, I loved a lot of Enid Blyton stories – The Secret Seven, The Famous Five, and there was also a series of mysteries, I remember.

I also loved, and still do actually, the Mary Poppins stories and the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe series.

But having said that, I like Jane Austin stories too –

There's something good about being able to get lost in a good story isn't there?

Jesus knew how important stories were and He did a lot of His teaching through telling stories didn't He? But His stories could be taken on several different levels – there was the basic level—which was the 'just a good story' level – but then if we look deeper at them, we can see different layers and different meanings to His stories.

Today's reading is a very familiar story – the story of the Good Samaritan but I wonder what we can find if we go a bit deeper? What different layers are there?

1/

The obvious layer is the basic story –

The road from Jerusalem down to Jericho was notorious for its level of crime – the road was bordered by huge rocks and stones where bandits and highway men would hide while they waited for a suitable traveller to pass by that they could attack and rob.

And apparently even as late as the 19th century it still wasn't a safe road to travel and any traveller wishing to guarantee his

safety had to pay the local sheiks what was called 'safety money'. And then even later in the 1930's a certain man was warned not to be out in the dark as it wasn't safe.

So, this narrow and twisty road wasn't a safe road and in Jesus' story there were robbers hiding along the road who then attacked and robbed a man of his possessions and he's left by the roadside – bleeding, bruised, in pain and he's left for dead.

As he lays there, he becomes aware of footsteps on the road – at last someone who can help him – and it's a Priest on his way home from the Temple – he may have just finished his shift at the Temple – surely, he'll help – this holy man from the Temple?

But no – he just crosses over and walks on by.

Then the man hears more footsteps – perhaps this person will help?

This time it's a Levite, also on his way home from the Temple – but no – the Levite doesn't stop either – he just walks on by –

Now both these men were so caught up in their traditions and Laws that they couldn't make allowances to help the man – they couldn't really tell if he was dead or alive and if he was dead, and they touched him, then that would have rendered them ritually unclean for a week or more and they couldn't then have carried out their important duties in the Temple – and they couldn't risk that happening –

Plus, the robbers in the area were also known to have planted decoys – people who weren't injured at all – and as soon as anyone stopped to help, the robbers jumped up and attacked them. So, they couldn't risk that happening either –

But then the poor man hears more footsteps approaching, plus the soft clip clop of a donkey – he's almost given up hope at this point, of anyone actually stopping, so he can hardly believe it

when the man and his donkey not only stop but come over to where he's laying. Not only that but this man helped him up and bathed his wounds and bandaged him up and put him on his donkey and took him to the nearest inn to be looked after – and this man wasn't anything to do with the Temple – he wasn't necessarily a religious person at all – in fact he was from Samaria – the place that the Jews would have nothing to do with –

It's a nice story though isn't it and things turn out alright in the end –

2/

But what else is going on here?

Let's go down a layer –

Why did Jesus tell this story in the first place?

It was because an Expert in the Law asked Jesus a question, didn't he? He asked Jesus what did someone have to do to inherit Eternal Life?

And Jesus answers this question with a question of His own – 'What does the Law say?'

You see this man was an expert in the Law – and he knew it from back to front and inside out – what he didn't know about the Law wasn't worth knowing –

And this expert's answer was, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.' This was the passage of scripture that every Jew learnt from childhood – it was fundamental to Judaism –

The expert knew all the answers! – he could read off anything that he was asked – but he still didn't know what he had to do

to inherit Eternal Life – even though Jesus said that his answer was correct and that if he did that then he would live.

But the expert didn't get it did he?

And he wanted Jesus to tell him who his neighbour was – who exactly did he have to love – surely not everyone?

And so, Jesus told this story about 3 people's responses to the injured man –

Let's look at the Priest and the Levite – were they fulfilling that commandment to love God with all their heart etc and to love their neighbour?

They would also have known all the answers but their behaviour didn't actually show it –

Their behaviour is the fruit of their hearts – Jesus said that it's by someone's fruit that we could tell if they belong to Him or not –

Both the Priest and the Levite thought they'd got it all sussed and that because they were high-up in the Temple and had special duties – that they were close to God – but they weren't – their hearts weren't right at all – they still had that God-shaped hole in their hearts that everyone has until they let Jesus fill it with Himself – nothing else can fill it – only a relationship with Jesus can fill that God-shaped hole – no amount of learning can bring anyone close to God – and neither the Priest nor the Levite actually had a relationship with God –

For them it was all about ritual and doing the things that came under that heading – there was no relationship – they knew everything there was to know about God but they didn't actually know God – and so they didn't understand that if they stopped to help the man they would have been carrying out the Law – and that by neglecting the man they were breaking the Law.

They couldn't see that their hearts were full of their own self-importance – and not full of the love of God –

The third man, however, the Samaritan, had more of God's love in his little finger than the other two put together – the Samaritan's heart was filled with compassion – that gut-wrenching feeling that we often read about Jesus feeling –

And there was no way that the Samaritan could walk on by – he had to help.

Now the Samaritans were always classed as second-rate Jews – they were thought to be inferior and outcasts – but in telling this story, Jesus is showing that this outcast, this inferior Jew had got it right – that his heart was open to God – that he had a relationship with God.

3/

Then we come to the man who was beaten up – who was left by the roadside – perhaps dying – what was going on for him?

Well, he expected help to come from the religious leaders but his help actually came from the last person he'd expect to help.

In fact, it was the very last person he'd want to help him.

But you see, here's the thing, when someone needs help, they don't always get to choose who it is that helps them.

The injured man was forced to receive help from the Samaritan because everyone else ignored him. Even though the Samaritan was his enemy – it was the Samaritan who stopped to help.

So, in answer to the Law Expert's question to Jesus, 'Who is my neighbour?' perhaps that answer is – anyone who needs help and anyone who gives help that help.

End/

I wonder who we would mostly identify with in that story?

Would we sometimes be like the Priest and the Levite? Perhaps we have important things to do here at church and we don't always want to get involved – don't want to get our hands dirty – or we haven't got time –

Or are we sometimes like the Expert in the Law? Perhaps we've done all the study – done all the courses – had all the education and can reel off various quotes from the Bible – but still we don't know what we need to do to inherit Eternal Life –

We can know a lot about God but perhaps we don't actually know God Himself – perhaps we don't have that important relationship with God through Jesus –

Or do we identify ourselves with the man in the ditch --?

Because, you see, that's who we really are, I think.

So, to finish, let's go back to the beginning – the Expert in the Law knows the scriptures but he doesn't know what he needs to do in order to inherit Eternal Life – and so Jesus tells this story about a man who can do absolutely nothing to save himself – he was absolutely desperate for help –

But that help didn't come from the Religious Leaders but from an outsider –

Religious Leaders can't offer Eternal Life –

Obedying the Law on its own doesn't give Eternal Life –

Religion doesn't offer Eternal Life –

Religion cannot save us –

Only Jesus, the outsider from Nazareth, can do that –

So that's why I think that we're all like that injured and dying man at the roadside – we're all helpless – we can't save ourselves – there's nothing we can do

We all need help – and Jesus is the only one who can help us.

You see, there's this God-shaped hole in each of our hearts that nothing else can fill – Jesus is the only one who is the perfect shape to fit that hole –

If we want Eternal Life then we must open up our hearts to Jesus and let Him in –

We must be in a relationship with Jesus – there is no other way –

We all need a Saviour – and that Saviour is Jesus!

I wonder if the Law Expert ever got to realise what Jesus was saying –

Because it seems to me that Jesus was saying that the Law Expert was like the helpless man at the roadside who was in need of help – in need of a Saviour – and that there was actually nothing that he could do to receive Eternal Life – Eternal Life only comes through the Grace and the Mercy of Jesus –

You see, Jesus is like the Good Samaritan who stops to help anyone in need.