

Luke 10

So we're continuing our look at Luke's most famous parables today, with the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's so famous that because of the actions of our hero in the story we get the saying that someone is a good Samaritan if they help someone without being asked or without looking to get something out of it. There are also heaps of charities that are named after this fictional character in Jesus' story.

But the question that this passage in Luke brings up for us is, "What does following God look like?" Or for us today, "What does being a Christian look like?" Well, if you go into a church on Sunday and look around, you can see what Christians look like. But I want us to dig a little deeper today about how to do Christian as well as be Christian, both of them together.

The story that Jesus tells is itself pretty easy to imagine. Some guy is going from Jerusalem to Jericho, so two main cities. It was a popular road, but it was dangerous because there were these robbers about. The guy gets robbed and horribly beaten, desperately in need of help. Two religious men from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem pass him by. One is a priest, whose job it was to do sacrifices for people in the temple; the other is a Levite, so from the priestly tribe of Levi but not an actual priest. His job was to do other stuff around the temple, like the cleaning, singing and playing music, and other admin duties. But the third person to come along in the story doesn't pass by: he helps the poor guy out in many generous ways.

But just as the story is clear, so is the point of the story. It's more than just "doing good stuff for people is good". It's really got all to do with the expert in the law's questions at the beginning: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "When God brings in his eternal kingdom, I want to be a part of that," he's saying. "What do I need to do?"

At this point, we might be tempted to say, "Silly expert, doesn't he know that it's not about doing, that it's just about having faith in Jesus?" But is it, though? Let's look at the priest and the Levite. They worked in the temple all the time. They heard Scripture all the time. When Jesus gets into a discussion elsewhere about the most important commandments, he picks out these verses from Deuteronomy about loving God and the verse from Leviticus about loving your neighbour. The words that we have from Deuteronomy are arguably the most famous, well-loved and important words in the Jewish faith. The priest and the Levite knew the law, as this expert in the law knew it as well, and it was integral to their faith.

But what good is just knowing? When it came to crunch time, it was what they did with what they knew that was important. It was what they did, because love of God must – must – express itself in love of neighbour.

But it's so hard. I mean, where do you even start? Just think back on last year. It seemed like everything was bad. There was the civil war in Syria. There was ISIS destroying everything in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia, Taliban in Afghanistan. There were terrorist attacks in Paris, Istanbul, Ouagadougou, Brussels and Berlin. And there's all the wars you don't hear about, like in Yemen and Democratic Republic of Congo, and Pakistan and Central African Republic, and Kazakhstan. Then there's still the problems of increased poverty and climate change, and domestic violence and racism. And it all seems so overwhelming. You just end up with compassion fatigue, getting so tired of having to care, and you end up not caring at all. It just seems easier that way.

Or maybe we know that we should care, but we end up making excuses. Look at the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story. At worst, they simply didn't care. But maybe they did feel sorry that this guy got beaten up and robbed, but also thought that if he was dead, if they touched a dead body, they would become unclean - that's what the Scriptures told them - and so they wouldn't be able to work in the temple for a week. Not that they checked. They looked for an excuse to not love their neighbour, and so to not love God as well.

Or maybe we think the world's problems are too big, so let's just focus on our family and friends. But let's look back at the Samaritan. He had no idea who this guy lying in the road was. The guy had had all his clothes stolen and he was badly beaten, so he was essentially anonymous, just a human in need of help. And the Samaritan was moved with compassion and helped him anyway. If we understand that we only have to help our family and relatives, are we then allowed to do evil to strangers? God forbid such a belief! We are neighbours, all people to all people, for we have one Father. As I said before, our love for God must, must, must result in love for all people.

But we might complain, "I can't solve the world's problems. What can I even do?" Well, this is a parable that Jesus is telling, so it's a story that's meant to teach us stuff. Look at the list of things that the Samaritan did. He gave up his stuff, the bandages and oil and wine he had. He gave up his comfort, and walked while the injured man rode. He gave up his money, when paying for him at the inn. He also gave up his time, by caring for the man overnight and then promising to come back to check on him. What Jesus is saying here is that there's not just one way of loving someone. You can love your neighbour in all these ways, or just a few, or even just one, or maybe in some other way you can think of.

Think about the stuff you own. When was the last time you went through your clothes? Do it when you get home and get rid of all the clothes you haven't worn in a year, or that you don't fit into - don't think that you might fit into one day, clothes you don't fit into now. Anything that's still in good condition, put it into bags and chuck them into an Anglicare clothing bin. Anglicare will on-sell them to raise money to help people in our community in many, many ways. Thinking of going overseas on holiday? Why not visit the local church there, or a missionary working in that country. It may not be the four-star resort you're used to, but it will be super encouraging for everyone. Maybe you want to help the homeless but don't know how. Then instead of asking for a thing for your birthday or Christmas, ask people to donate to a charity that does, like Mission Australia or Vinnies. Or you could give your time to volunteer to help people out, like with Anglicare, or you can just take some time to listen to someone who needs to talk.

There are so many ways we can love our neighbour, but we have to actually do it, not just feel bad or feel sorry, or feel like we should do something. Because the one thing that the Samaritan does by his actions is shame the priest and the Levite for their lack of action. The Samaritan is the one we should be aiming to be like, someone who loves God and then naturally goes on to love his neighbour, no matter who they might be, and no matter what the cost to himself, because love is generous.

But, of course, in all this I haven't answered an important question: "What is a Samaritan, anyway?" I mean, apart from being somebody from Samaria, which doesn't really answer the question. You see, Jesus uses a Samaritan for a very particular reason. If he was just talking about an enemy or a pagan person doing all these good deeds, he probably would

have said he was a Roman or something. But he doesn't. Let's see why. For this, I'm going to have to take you back on a journey into the past, back 700 years before Jesus, so about 2,700 years from us. At this time, it's all happening in the Middle East, and the big thing that's happening is that the Assyrian Empire, based around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers – kind of where Iraq is today - is expanding. They attack the northern part of what was the kingdom of Israel and take it over. They then deport most of the local population and settle people from other parts of their empire. This was the Assyrians' way of keeping peace, because it meant people couldn't organise a rebellion easily. (Fun fact, they also introduced the Aramaic language into the region, which Jesus spoke).

But because this is the Middle East, and you can never go too long without some sort of fighting. Fast forward 400 years, and Alexander the Great comes along, conquering the world from Greece to India and down to Egypt, of course including Israel. When he died, his empire was split up and ruled by his Greek generals. Eventually, though, the region destabilises, the Jews rise up against the Greeks and put in a king of their own. That's what Hannukah is all about.

But what's this got to do with the Samaritans? Well, Samaria was that region in the north of Israel that had all their people deported by the Assyrians, and had people from other cultures imported. They had a historical split from Jerusalem and the southern region, and because of this history they had a different tradition about worshipping God. For example, they just stuck to the first five books of the Old Testament, rather than the rest, which the Jews used. They also didn't worship at Jerusalem but on their own temple on Mount Gerizim, which, it may surprise you to find out, was the location of one of three temples to Yahweh at the time of Greek rule (the other one was in Egypt). Mount Gerizim had always been a holy place: it was where blessings were said to Israel when they first entered the land under Joshua. So, like Jerusalem, most of the Samaritans lived here, because their temple was the heart of their beliefs and their culture.

The Samaritans happily worshipped God in their temple on Mount Gerizim until the Jews, with their new king, conquered Samaria and burnt that temple to the ground. They also enslaved the Samaritans and forced them to take on Jewish customs. The Jews thought this was a great move, because it expanded their kingdom and they saw the Samaritans as a hybrid of cultures with dangerously wrong ideas about God. But imagine how absolutely devastating it must have been for the Samaritans. And it's not like it was long ago, from when Jesus was telling this parable. There would have been people alive whose grandparents fought in that war, or who saw the temple destroyed. So you can understand that there was a lot of tension between the Jews and the Samaritans. To each of them, they were very different, separated by all these years of history and culture, and different beliefs.

So when Jesus describes this Samaritan coming down the road, what would his Jewish listeners have thought the Samaritan would do? Certainly nothing good. I mean, Samaritans wouldn't know how to do something good. They had the wrong set of Scriptures. They'd had a temple in the wrong place, and now they didn't have one at all. Who knows what sort of things they were being taught. For the Jews, a neighbour would have to be a fellow Jew; that's just how it was. Only Jews had the law right, so only Jews could do the law right. And yet it's the Samaritan, not the priest, not the Levite, who loves in the way that God has told them to. He had heard, "Love the Lord your God," and, "Love your neighbour as yourself," from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and he was doing them. I reckon the expert in the law gets it, because he answers Jesus, "The one who showed him mercy." He doesn't say "the

Samaritan”, because Jewness or Samaritaness isn’t the issue. “The one who showed him mercy.” The one who listened to God and did what he said, the one who loved God, and out of that love for God, loved his neighbour. That’s the issue.

A few years ago now, I went with a group of fellow students from Morling College on a trip to Israel and Jordan, and this included going around to places mentioned in the Bible. Most of them had churches on them, and they could be pretty amazing. Everything is covered in gold, with pictures of saints and stories from the Bible, and lights everywhere. And I remember that when we were back on the bus there was a discussion about how anyone could possibly worship in a place like that, how wrong that sort of showy worship was. There we were, thinking we were so enlightened, when in fact all we were doing was being judgmental, thinking about how nothing good could come out of a different style of worship.

I think we can often have a first instinct that criticises others, that seeks to put down instead of encourage. We look around ourselves and see in church people who look like us, so we can end up thinking that Christians must be people who look like us. We can forget that just because someone isn’t part of our church tradition, doesn't mean they can't do amazing good, like Mother Theresa from the Catholic Church, or Hillsong’s CityCare welfare network, or the Coptic Hope Charity that supports isolated Christians in Egypt. Instead of being hostile and critical, we should find encouragement in their example. Our aim has to be to love God and then practically, actually, love our neighbour in however many ways we can. That's what following God looks like. That's what being a Christian looks like. We should be looking at how others can love their neighbour and, as Jesus says, “Go, and do likewise.”