

## THE GOOD SAMARITAN

**PREACHER : The Very Revd John Arnold, former Dean of Rochester**

Sunday, July 11<sup>th</sup> 2010

**Trinity 6**

Luke 10: 25-37

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

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Peter said, Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (Acts 10<sup>34f</sup>)

One way in which groups of people, nations, races and religions keep together and maintain their morale is by hating and despising other groups. In a life in which lots of things go wrong it helps to be able to blame everything on “them” and to strengthen our own view of ourselves as bold, brave, true and always right. The best objects for hatred are people, who are quite close to us, but recognisably different, collaborators, deviants and heretics.

In Jesus’ day the Samaritans played this part for the Jews. There they lived right in the middle of Palestine, dividing Galilee from Judea, worshipping the same God but with different rites and ceremonies and a shorter bible with only the first five books in it, claiming to be more faithful to the Law of Moses, having remained behind when the rest of the Jews were deported to Babylon, suspected of collaboration with the invaders and scorning the rebuilt temple at Jerusalem and the new developments in religion in favour of their old customs and the temple on Mount Gerizim. Just as today Israeli citizens travel from Galilee to Judea via the Jordan valley, Jericho and the road up to Jerusalem in order to avoid the West Bank, so in Jesus’ day Jews took the same long detour in order to avoid Samaria and the loathsome Samaritans, with whom, as Jesus Himself said, they had no dealings. It is an astonishing testimony to the power of storytelling, that the parable which we have just heard for today’s Gospel should have completely reversed the meaning of the word ‘Samaritan’ from negative to positive, from that which is most hated and despised to that which is most esteemed and admired, from those we cross the street to avoid to those to whom we turn first when we are suicidal or in despair. Jesus doesn’t call the hero of His story ‘good’. We do; and we simply assume that all Samaritans are ‘Good Samaritans’, an assumption, which would have astonished His contemporaries and hearers.

So, let me tell you a story, not a parable, but a true story from my own childhood in the early 1930s, when Fascism had triumphed in Italy and was taking over in Spain and Portugal and especially in Germany and was widely, and indeed rightly, loathed in England. Its influence had reached the German Hospital in Dalston, which was not a hospital for Germans but a hospital founded by Germans for the poor of London before the days of the National Health Service. My mother, who had worked for the optical firm of Carl Zeiss, knew a certain Doktor Winkler there; and he had offered his services, if ever they should be needed. I was very poorly and at the point of death; and this Nazi saved my life, ironically enough so that I could grow up and become a Christian and an anti-Fascist. He proved neighbour to me, when I needed him, which is the answer to the challenge posed by Jesus to the lawyer, though not the answer to the question posed by the lawyer to Jesus. In a typical action, which is repeated whenever we do this in remembrance of Him, He takes what is offered, breaks it, transforms it with His living word and gives it back with value added.

For the question about what is necessary for the life of the age to come is a standard rabbinic gambit for opening a game, not of chess but of law, such as a professional lawyer might expect to win on his own terms, thus demonstrating in public his superiority over a mere travelling teacher. ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus realises that he doesn’t really want an answer, he only wants an argument, so He answers the question with another question, which is a standard rabbinic response to

a lawyer, 'What does it say in the Law?'; and the lawyer gives the right answer, in fact exactly the same answer as Jesus Himself gives, when faced with a similar question in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (Mt 22.37ff, Mk12.29-31). So far so good and so superficial, in fact rather boring like most arguments about religion, as Jesus seems to imply by his offhand agreement.

Then suddenly the story begins to bite. It stops being abstract and becomes concrete, personal, existential; it changes gear as the cogs of conscience engage in the presence of Jesus, and the lawyer feels the need to justify himself. Actually, he doesn't need to do so within the terms of this anecdote. After all, he has given the right answer, not a wrong one. But right answers and always being in the right are not enough for justification, for inheriting eternal life; only right relationships will do, as Paul was soon to teach and Luther later to rediscover, right relationships with God, right relationships with neighbour. The lawyer has been forced to change the terms of the debate, and now he slips up and asks the wrong question. The moment we question 'Who is my neighbour?', we condemn ourselves of trying to limit the boundaries of the People of God, perhaps even of humanity itself, with potentially disastrous consequences. Jesus, at the end of His little story, asks the right question, 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' and He elicits the right reply, 'The one who showed him mercy', thus enabling the lawyer to become a better man, a better neighbour and perhaps even a better lawyer than he was at the beginning of the story, because he now understands that what matters in the Law is not pettifogging point-scoring and tithing anise and cumin but justice, mercy and truth. Jesus doesn't put the lawyer down; He raises him up.

That is one of the two main points of the story and the one that requires explaining. The other, that we, whoever we are, should go to the aid of those who need help, whoever they are, does not require explanation; it requires obedience, obedience to the command of Jesus, 'Go and do likewise', obedience to the command, 'Follow me,' in responding to the needs not only of the lost sheep of the House of Israel, but also to those, for example, of a Roman centurion and a Syro-phenician woman. The scope of Jesus' mission was limited by the possibilities of first century Palestine. Ours, now, is practically limitless; Jesus said, 'You shall do greater things than these'; and we cannot just pass by, when 'most of the world (is) lying half-dead in the road.' (N.T.Wright.). From time to time, we in Rochester Cathedral can refresh our discipleship by slipping into the Lady Chapel, lifting the rubber floor mat, where indicated by a pointing finger cut into the slate, and contemplating the carving of the story of the Good Samaritan. It is one of my favourite spots in this marvellous building. But it is not just there for its beauty and its quaintness. It is there for its message: IBI FAC SIMILE. Go and do likewise.

**Amen.**