



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

23rd June, 2023

"... he passed by on the other side."

Luke 10.31/32

One of the best known of Jesus' parables is the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30-35. The fact that Bible editors label the Samaritan 'Good' implies that the Priest and the Levite (a temple official), both of whom passed by the injured man, were 'bad'. Jesus does not say that. The problem might actually be that they were *'too good'*! Let's look a little deeper, -you might like to re-read the story first (remembering it is a story!).

Did you notice that Jesus makes a point of saying that the robbers left their victim *"half dead"* (the translation in nearly all versions)? Why did Jesus use that phrase? The Jews had strict laws concerning dead bodies (Leviticus 21:11, Numbers 9:6, 19:11). Anyone who touched a dead body would be unclean for seven days and unable to engage with any worship practices in the community. Then there were purification rituals to through. The consequences of having touched a body and hiding the fact, *not* going through purification, were serious (Numbers 19:13). The point of Jesus' *"half dead"* phrase is that the Priest and Levite *could not have known* whether the victim was dead or alive, and couldn't risk contamination by going to find out. Maybe also they were within sight of each other on the road, and could see what each other did.

Imagine the tension in their minds: here was a man who might or might not be dead; the only way to find out was to go and touch him, and thereby risk defiling themselves. Perhaps each thought the other would be checking. So the fact that they both *"passed by on the other side"* (perhaps pausing to see any sign of life) was not because they were 'bad' people, but rather that they were 'good', in the strict terms of Judaism. They would need to maintain religious purity in order to perform their sacred duties in the temple (assuming where they were heading). So their need for religious purity took precedence over the neighbourliness, compassion and love that must also have been in their hearts. That was wrong; *that's the point!*

The Samaritan had no such constraining religious laws, with inconvenient consequences backed up by potential punishments; he was able to care for the injured man without fear of ritual uncleanness, of being defiled, excluded, and of defiling anything he then touched (Numbers 19:22).

So, yes, it's a parable about neighbourliness and love-in-action, of course, -but maybe also it's about priorities, and the relative importance of the things that crowd in upon Christian hearts. What would I do if, on the way to church, with an important duty to carry out and people relying on me, I saw someone fall in the street, or witnessed an accident? What is my priority?

Parents long for their teenagers to talk to them, but how often is it a busy priority-pressured moment that they hear, *"Dad/Mum, can we talk?"* Jesus told the parable to *"an expert in the law"* (Luke 10:25), who would have endorsed the priority of the priest and the Levite, and tried to justify their responses. Jesus says to him -and to me- *"be more Samaritan!"*