

The Good Samaritan, Trinity V, 2025

Go and do likewise.

When you come across somebody lying bloodied and battered in the street, go and help them.

Yes, even if they're strange and wild eyed, and not right in the head, and unkempt, and on drugs and maybe dangerous... they still count. They still are your neighbour. They still have a claim on your time, your money, your love ... love, that is, not in the sense of having warm, fuzzy feelings about them, but love in the traditional Christian sense, that you will act in their best interests, you'll serve them, you'll do what's good is for them.

Go and do likewise.

How's that going for you?

If you are anything like me, you walk past most beggars. I'm sorry they're there. In my better moments, I'm sorry for them, but ... there are so many buts. Are they on drugs? If I give them money, is it going straight to their addiction? And if they're not on drugs... is it really so hard to get a job, some sort of job, rather than just sit there waiting for handouts? And if they're not from this country, as many are not, should they not really go back to where there are families and friends to support them?

And if I *did* slow down, and talk to them, and hear their story, wouldn't I find it was so complicated, so miserable, so 'wouldn't start from here', that I wouldn't have a clue how to really help? My life is already a rush, already full of busy-ness, I have enough problems of my own – to really *help* this person, to really love my neighbour, is just asking too much. So, mostly, I walk on by. Often not even saying hello, not making eye contact, pretending not to hear the 'spare any change'. Sometimes, I have literally crossed to the other side of the road, just like the useless priest in Jesus' story.

I know I'm not alone in this. So, are we all bad Christians? Have we just failed, totally, to be what Jesus wants us to be? Go, and do likewise.

Before answering that, I'm going to take a detour through the way in which the early Church almost always told the parable of the Good Samaritan. We, you see, tend to leap almost instantly to where I started – to the moral application. Go and be a better person! Go and love more people! Go and look after beggars. Go, go, go. Should, should, should. Now that's not wrong. But it is perhaps a bit limited. The Gospel is never just a set of 'shoulds'. Just a set of moral instructions. God so loved the world that He sent his only Son, to tell us that we must do better. That's not the Gospel. And the early Church was very keen on seeing the Gospel in everything Jesus said.

So, here's how they told this parable:

A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The man was Adam, the symbol of every man. He left Jerusalem, the place of paradise, God's dwelling place, the joy of all the earth and he tumbled down to Jericho: the place of ruins, the den of thieves, the Badlands. His story is all our stories: the falling away from God into chaos. And the being attacked, by the dark bandits of sin and death, which stripped him, and left him bleeding, half-dead in the road. That's us, made in the image of God, made to be brilliant and beautiful, beaten and stripped of our glory by sin, left dying in the dust. Religion in the shape of the priest and the Levite proved useless to help us; it does nothing, it has no power to heal. Healing comes only from this unexpected stranger, who is moved with pity, and who bends down to nurse us, with his wine and his oil. This is Jesus, says the early Church, the one whom Religion rejected, who the priests had no time for. Jesus nurses us, with his wine, his oil: his sacraments. He brings us to the inn, the church. And he tells the innkeeper, the bishop, you look after this man till I come again. You nurse him, you tend him back to health.

So you see, in the early Church, the preaching point wasn't: imagine yourself walking along the road, would you stop and help? No, you're *the victim in the road*. You're the one lying battered and bruised and half-dead. You're the one who needs help, the one who gets nursed. You get mercy shown to you, by Jesus, in his Church.

And only because of that, do you then go and do likewise: do you then go and show mercy to others. Christians aren't good, powerful, rich, resourceful people who by their own strength and wisdom fix other people's problems. They are people who've been shown great kindness. And, incidentally, wholly undeserved kindness. The man lying in the road had nothing obvious to recommend him – he may, indeed, have been a terrible person. He didn't *deserve* the care given him, he was simply given it.

So, go and do likewise. Our call is to treat each other, and to treat all the people lying in the road, battered and bleeding, with unreserved kindness. Before they prove they deserve it, before we know they're worthwhile. And the Gospel is we can do that, because that's what has been done to us. Jesus didn't insist that I qualified for his love. No, He just loved me.

So back to that earlier question. Should we feel terribly guilty every time we walk past the beggar? Every time we don't give them time, money, care, love?

Well... it's a hard question, and I'm not sure I've got the answer entirely right. But here's how I make sense of it.

The call is to see people as Jesus does, and to love them as He does.

And that does mean that when I am hard-hearted: when I simply ignore someone, or resent them intruding on my life with their neediness, or when I say it's their own fault they're in the mess they're in and so I don't need to care about them... well yes, that's a sin. I do need to feel guilty. That kind of hard-heartedness is exactly what Jesus came to smash up.

That said, it's also simply true that my resources are limited, of time, of money, of love. I can't meet every need that crosses my path, and neither can you.

And it's true that loving people doesn't necessarily mean giving them what they want. It *isn't* loving to give a crack addict, or an alcoholic, cash. It *isn't* loving to enable someone's self-destruction. It isn't even, necessarily, on the bigger political scale, loving just to go on and on paying benefits: never challenging people to rely on themselves, to meet their own needs. Sometimes, often times, loving people means being tough with them. Sometimes, what the person lying in the road needs is – metaphorically speaking! – a good kick.

Which is true, but which is also a wonderfully convenient excuse for not loving people. The kind of thing I've just said, your standard Daily Telegraph or Daily Mail editorial – 'people must take responsibility for their own lives' – can easily become what G.K. Chesterton called one of the easy speeches that comfort cruel men. We're good at dressing up meanness and cruelty, and making them sound respectable and virtuous. How do you know, when you talk about tough love, that that's not just what we're doing?

Well, here are two practical suggestions. Number One: make a rule. You don't get to say that stuff, you don't even get to think it, unless you're practically supporting the people who *do* work with the homeless, with the poor, with the most vulnerable. Yes, you can't give your life to helping them, but other people do. People who know what they're doing, who know how to *really* help, but people who can't do it unless the rest of us back them up. Don't give your cash to the beggar, fine – you're probably quite wise – but *do give it* to Watford New Hope, or Shelter, or the Food Bank. If you can't give your money, give your time. And maybe you really can't do either, maybe ... but I reckon most of us could. And if you think you can't, maybe life needs to be re-arranged a bit so you can.

At which you might say, bunging twenty quid a month to Watford New Hope is not exactly doing likewise, not exactly being Jesus. Agreed, though let's not knock it, and if we all did it, it would be great! But yes, more is called for. So why not this: identify just *one* situation, *one* person where you really can give time, effort, care, attention, *maybe* money, but above all love? One person. Doesn't have to be a beggar, though it might be. Just one person beaten up by life: your next door neighbour. A lonely person. A single parent struggling. Absolutely, you can't solve every social problem yourself. You're not going to end homelessness, or hunger, or loneliness. But you could, maybe, end those things for one person. At the very least, you could end their isolation. Their feeling of abandonment, of worthlessness. And if you're not doing that little bit, that one person mission, may I suggest you lay off the speeches about tough love. You might even be right about social policy and how it should work - but there's a beam in your own eye. Your heart is hard, and it needs to melt.

The call is really simple, and really difficult. We have been loved, loved with immense gentleness, tenderness, mercy. Loved before we deserved it. We are being loved into brilliance and beauty. Because we are loved, we are to love. To show the same gentleness to all around us, before they deserve it. That's what this parable means. To me, as much as to you, the message is simple, and really difficult. Go and do likewise. Amen.