

*Trinity 6 2010*

Imagine you are the person that has been robbed.

You come round and find that you are in a strange room.

You ask where you are and are told the name of the inn.

You remember the robbers and being hit, then nothing more.

You ask who rescued you.

You are told, a Samaritan – what? Not a proper Jew.

You have always looked down on Samaritans.

Well, you decide you had better find out how much you owe so that when you get home you can settle up.

The inn keeper says: 'There's no charge, it has already been paid for by the Samaritan!'

Now this is really challenging information. You have never liked being indebted to anyone, but to a Samaritan...!

Perhaps you could keep quiet about it and not tell anyone.

O.k. so this is poetic licence. It is not in the story. But experience tells me that people don't like having to be grateful, and especially if it is to someone they don't like.

Let's go back to this story, which is one of the most famous in the bible. Like the lawyer, we know the answer to the question 'what must we do to obtain eternal life?'. Because of this story, we don't have to ask 'and who is my neighbour?', we know that the word neighbour does not simply mean those who live next door, or those we like. We know that Jesus wants us to love everyone, even the people we look down upon.

However, most of the time we are far from being like the Samaritan. Sometimes we are like the priest and the levite – we pass by on the other side. And equally, sometimes we are like the man who was robbed, though, rather than being full of gratitude, we deeply resent the fact that we needed help and would like to distance ourselves from it.

Deep within nearly all of us is some kind of prejudice – it may be race, class, intellectual snobbery, religious, whatever, but there is nearly always something. And most of us are ashamed of it, we know it isn't right and we keep it well concealed, and try to keep it within check. But there are a few within our society who are proud to be intolerant, who encourage others to display their prejudice and fan it until it becomes fear and then hate.

Jesus understood well the fears and prejudices that led and still lead to intolerance, so gently, through a story, he challenges the assumptions and prejudices of his day.

It is hard to learn to love, and very hard to put love into practice. It means going out of one's way, giving up time – and who has time these days – and operating well out of one's comfort zone. But frankly it is downright impossible unless we are prepared to **accept** love whenever and from whomsoever it is offered.

A child who is very angry with its parents may use the ultimate argument:

'I didn't ask to be born', as though that made it O.K. to never be thankful.

It seems as though, while as adults we may not use those words, we echo the principal.

I didn't ask for any help, why do people interfere?

Why is he/she taking it upon himself to do that? I didn't ask them to do it?

I didn't plan to get pregnant, why should I keep it?

I didn't ask God to make the world so beautiful.

I didn't ask God to provide me with parents, friends, family.

So why should I be thankful?

But until we learn to value what is offered to us, we can have nothing worthwhile to offer to anyone else and we risk damaging the wonderful gifts that are given to us – relationships, the environment, life itself.

Unless we appreciate the cost of other people's sacrifice, how will we be able to make sacrifices ourselves.

If we read the letters of Paul we find that they are full of thankfulness and this often comes before the encouragement to good works, to endurance and faith. That is because doing good - being a good neighbour - encourages thankfulness and thankfulness encourages being a good neighbour. They go together, because they are both pleasing to God.

Could it be that a man saved from certain death on a road to Jericho could fail to be grateful to his rescuer?

Common sense tells us no, but human experience tells us yes. Oh, he will be pleased to be alive, but rather than bringing joy he may harbour resentment, a nagging feeling that he ought to do something in return when he really really doesn't want to do anything. And the attitudes that limit his vision, that qualify who in neighbour and who is beyond the pale remain intact.

It would be all too easy for him to slip back into his old way of life – unchanged, no wiser, no more loving or generous than before.

It is worth asking ourselves, if a man rescued you, did more than that, was killed himself in the process for you, even though you had never met him before, would you be changed? Would you become more generous, more loving, more willing to put yourself out for others? Would you do this without limit, with no boundaries on who can be regarded as a neighbour? Even if the man who rescued you, who died for you, happened to be Jesus?