

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost:
Sunday, July 14, 2019

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalm 25:1-9

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

We drive so much these days that we see a lot of the world through our car windows. This probably explains why there is now a whole genre of road side sign humor. Like the sign outside the Baptist Church that says “Whoever stole our AC units, keep one. It is hot where you are going” Or the one in a library that warns parents, “Unattended Children will be given a Red Bull and a Free puppy.” Finally, the one outside a Methodist Church, that says “Don’t let worries kill you. Let the Church help.” This last one just goes to show things can be very obvious but not be seen by the people closest to them!

As I mentioned last Sunday, I was privileged to travel with some of our young people to Tennessee the other week to spend some time volunteering with an organisation called the Appalachia Service Project. We stayed on the floor of a gym in an elementary School in Cocke County

and split up into teams to go and work each day on a family's home. The focus is to make homes safe, wind and watertight and to improve the quality of the families' lives by making their home safer and more habitable. Really simple things like a new roof or floor or basic painting and insulation can make a big difference to people. The work is only a part of it though. In fact they call it a "relationship ministry with home improvements." The benefit to both the people being helped, and to those trying to help, goes way beyond the home improvements, great though they are. The chance to meet and talk to people from a very different way of life is something that will stay with me, and I am sure our young people, for a very long time.

I also think, or perhaps hope, that the family we met were, after a certain understandable wariness, were glad enough sit down with these fancy folks from up north and to tell their stories about their lives. Their stories were good to hear and i think we learnt a lot. We also learnt some things which we probably didn't need to know as well. Did you know, for instance, what the difference between a Yanky and a Damn Yanky is? Apparently a Yanky is someone who lives up north. A Damn Yanky, on the other hand, is a Yanky who is from up north but who comes down south! Well, many things divide us, in the world of ours, of course; ways of life, education, money,

beliefs, history, but the week encouraged me to believe that they are not so hard to overcome if you spend time with people and take them seriously. In any case, I and young Tim now have a standing invitation to go bear hunting, and rattle snake catching if we every care to take it up. I am not sure that I am brave enough to do so! Maybe one day!

In the famous Gospel Story today, we have a lawyer, we would say theologian, testing out Jesus with a formal theological question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It was, and I suppose is, one of those questions that is used to see how orthodox a religious teacher is.

Jesus, as he often did, puts the question back to the lawyer. 'You're a lawyer, what does the law say?' The lawyer replies with the Shema Ysrael from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which is a prayer devout Jews said and say twice every day - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." He also adds Leviticus 19: 17 -18 "You must love your neighbor as yourself." If he is looking for a debate, he gets none here. Jesus simply says "You are right. Do this and you shall live." Both might be the hardest things to live

out, but they could not be much simpler to understand. It could be put on a sign on the side of the highway.

The lawyer is not satisfied though. He wants to probe Jesus further and asks another set question that was often debated among Jewish theologians of the time. "And who is my neighbor?"

We then get the eternal story of the Good Samaritan which we all know so well. The hypocritical Pharisee and Sadducee passing by on the other side and the despised (from a Jewish and, no doubt, the lawyers perspective at least) Samaritan who helps the man.

One thing is perhaps not so obvious on first, or even one hundredth hearing.

If you notice, Jesus does not answer the question, "Who is my neighbor." Various answers to the question were around. Some argued that only their fellow Jews could be considered neighbors. Some cast the net a little wider

than that. But Jesus doesn't even attempt to say who the neighbor is. Instead he describes, in this story, what it means to be a neighbor. "Go and do likewise," he tells the Lawyer. We have no idea who the wounded man is, no idea what nationality, or religion he is. He is just a man that has been robbed and is lying half dead in the road. He is an example also for us, of the many people we might meet on our way, and the choice we all have is the one Jesus describes.

This is important because we too, can get caught up in the debate about who is our neighbor and who isn't. We can do that, of course, but if we do, we can't claim Jesus as justification for our answer whatever that might be. Our lists, were we to make them, would all be far more revealing in terms of the groups we left out rather than in terms of those groups we put in. The Gospel story, as told, is very pointedly against the religious Jewish Lawyer and the culture he represents, but it doesn't take the brains of an Archbishop (as the soldiers I served with used to say) to be aware that we are all on the line here.

If you or I were to ask Jesus “Who is my neighbor?” how do you think he would he tell the story to us? I think we can pretty clearly imagine and populate the parable with our own characters if we wanted to.

Who do we respect? Who do we believe are the virtuous in the land? Who do we see as good people, sound people, our people? Those are the people that would be passing by on the other side in Jesus’ parable told for us. No question in my mind. Who would be the Good Samaritan? He would be from a group of people we despise. A group of people we see as wicked and heretical. If not an actual enemy, then certainly someone we think has very wrong beliefs and who we want nothing to do with. I think we can all fill in the blanks, and, of course, the characters vary for each of us depending on our attitudes, beliefs and our views of the world. Your Good Samaritan may very possibly be very different from mine or the person sitting next to you.

The thing about this parable, like all Jesus’ Parables, is that none of us can escape our place in it if we go even just a small way under the surface of

the story. If we come away thinking that there is no challenge to us in this then we will have certainly missed the point.

I think I had a lot of preconceived ideas about the people we were likely to meet down in Appalachia. Superficially, some of those preconceived ideas had some truth in them, I think. Discovering that you are able to buy a pint of milk a loaf of bread and a 3030 rifle and 200 rounds of ammunition in the local supermarket kind of fitted with that. If, however, I went away that week thinking we were the Good Samaritans of the piece, then I came away thinking rather this. If I were lying by the roadside, I would have as high hopes of help from some of the people I met there as from people I have met all across the world.

So, my reflection on the Gospel this week, is twofold. First, don't think about who your neighbor is. Think about how God would have you behave as a neighbor to all the people you come across on life's road. Secondly, don't let the difficulty of living the Christian life obscure the blindingly obvious. Love God and love your neighbor is not hard to understand. It could fit on a road sign. As today's first reading says, "the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." It is when we distance ourselves from the people that are right in front of our eyes, turn them in to ideas and issues and concepts that we tend to go wrong.

Jesus is not interested in the theorizing of the Lawyer. His question to him and to us is simply, “Who was a neighbor to the man that fell into the hands of robbers?” “Go and do likewise.”