

The reading to which we have just listened is the gospel suggested for this day during the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. The theme this year is: **Be-longing: Praying for unity amidst injustice**. The story of the **Good Samaritan** is so well known that the phrase '*Good Samaritan*' has passed into our culture and language – when someone has done a kind deed, perhaps at cost to themselves, then people talk about him/her as being a '*Good Samaritan*'. Even those who have little or no knowledge of the New Testament would recognise this phrase, even if they couldn't tell you where it came from. But to understand the story, you have to understand who this story is about...

The **Samaritans**, lived in what had been the **Northern Kingdom** of Israel. They were a racially mixed society, with both Jewish and pagan ancestry. Like mainstream Judaism, they believed in one God. In some respects, they were even more strict about the commands of the Mosaic law, but they did not share the Jewish practice that prohibited, for example, using the divine name in their oaths.

Because of these differences (and their partly pagan ancestry) the **Samaritans** were despised by mainstream Judaism. Rather than contaminate themselves by passing through Samaritan territory, Jews who were travelling from **Judea** to **Galilee** or vice versa would cross over the **river Jordan**, by-pass Samaria by going through **Transjordan**, and cross over the river again as they neared their destination.

But it didn't end there... Because they were also partly **Jewish**, the **pagan** authorities like the Romans, *also* despised the Samaritans – if the Jewish people hated them because they thought they were pagans, the pagans hated them because they thought they were Jewish! You couldn't really win if you were a Samaritan. They were seen by everyone as being a people '**without worth**' /worth nothing. And, as so often happens, this bad feeling went both ways...

So, let's go back to this story in St. Luke that we have listened to today...

Here is Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem. He's sent out his disciples to preach and teach and they have returned full of excitement about the success of their mission and Jesus rejoices with them. And '*just then*' (that's the phrase that Luke uses...) a **lawyer** who has evidently been listening to what Jesus has to say, stands up and he says to Jesus, '*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*' Despite the respectful tone of the address, Luke says that the lawyer, '*...stood up **to test** Jesus*' – In other words, this is a bit of a trick question, he's trying to catch Jesus out.

But Jesus isn't going to play that game, so he turns the question back on the lawyer: '*He said to him, 'What is written in the Law?' In other words, 'Come on, you're a lawyer, what does the Law say...?' And the lawyer gives a textbook lawyer's answer – he quotes **Jewish Law** (the Torah), word for word – '*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* (in other words with everything that you have and are...) *and your neighbour as yourself.*'*

*'Right answer,'* says Jesus, '*do that and you'll live...*' (remember his question was about what he has to do to 'gain eternal life...')

Now, this lawyer doesn't much like having Jesus 'get one over on him' so easily so he pushes the issue... '*Well,*' he says, '*and who exactly is my neighbour?*'

So Jesus tells him this now familiar story about a Jewish traveller who gets set upon by a band of robbers. Both a priest and a Levite, members of the Jewish religious establishment, pass by without stopping to help. Then, says Jesus, along comes a **Samaritan**. What will he do? Well, the people would have been all too ready to think the worst – But, **No!** This man is the one who stops, and he goes over to the wounded traveller because, says Jesus, '**he was moved with pity...**', he '**had compassion**' on him.

Now that's very important, because in **Greek** the word used here for having '**pity**' or '**compassion**' is a word that is **ONLY** ever used in the Gospels about **Jesus!** – Jesus has pity on people, Jesus has compassion on them... but here, the word is used to describe not just any other person but it is used to describe a **Samaritan**...

Here is someone who doesn't just **talk about his faith**, he **puts it into practice!** Here is someone who isn't 'professionally religious', he's an ordinary person (who actually, others don't think is worth very much at all...) who sees *beyond race or nationality, religion or class*, who instead sees simply the '**worth**' in another human being! And *that*, says Jesus, is what it's all about...! **HE** is the one who gets it! **HE** is the one who stops, and cares, and '*has compassion*', who sees the intrinsic value of another person and so *does* something, and so proves himself a friend of God...

But we need to pause here because this is **not** essentially a story whose meaning is simply '*be kind to others*' or '*be nice to people*' – after all the central character in the gospel narrative is **not** the Samaritan traveller but the **lawyer** whose agenda is to test Jesus on a point of Jewish Law. So, rather, the point of this reading is about a **radical challenge to racial, cultural and religious prejudice**, a story that offers an alternative narrative to arrogant stereotypes and facile pre-suppositions about someone marginalised and excluded by prevailing norms.

Similarly, if we believe that '**ecumenism**' is about simply being '*being nice*' to Christians of other denominations (who we may sometimes quietly believe not to be quite the 'proper Christians' that we are...) then we fundamentally misunderstand the challenge of ecumenism.... The **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity** is a time when we make a particular effort to express that unity for which Jesus prays when he prays for his disciples, '*that they might be one, so that the world might believe...*' (and just note for a moment the **missiological** dimension of that prayer – the purpose of the disciples' unity is **not** their own well-being but **so that** the world, those who witness their life together, might believe.

But we know that it is not always easy to translate ideals into action. We all have our own Church agendas and we have to practice our church life and our ecumenism not only against the backdrop of these (however complicated or contentious they may sometimes be...) but also against the backdrop of sheer indifference of many people who see working ecumenically as the province of a committed few, rather than all of us.

I want to read you a short extract from another sermon – not one of mine I have to say, but it is one of the best ecumenical statements that I know: The writer takes his text from the story of Jehonodad in the First Book of Kings. He says:

*“There is a particular love which we owe to those who love God. (Jesus said) ‘A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you...’ Everyone approves of this, but does everyone practice it? Daily experience shows that this is not the case. Where are even the Christians who love one another... But although difference in opinion or in our modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet does it need to prevent our union in affection. Though we cannot all think alike, may we not all love alike. May we not be of one heart, (even) though we are not of one opinion... Indeed we may...”.*

Those words were written nearly 300 years ago, in the 1740s, by a young Anglican priest named John Wesley.

In many ways, as an ecumenist, Wesley was way ahead of his time. In that sermon, which he titles, *The Catholic Spirit*, he invites people to move away from what divides them and to concentrate rather on what they have/share in common. Now that’s a radical idea, isn’t it? Instead of focussing on what we don’t agree on, we could begin by finding ways of working on what we do agree on – we can find, in other words, the common ground, a ‘shared foundation’, as the New Testament puts it.

In his address to the **World Council of Churches**, meeting in **Karlsruhe** less than four months, **Archbishop Justin Welby** said something very similar. He said this:

*I believe that times of great world crisis, and they are greater today than perhaps ever before in human history, say to all of us, the time of ecumenical winter and the habits of division, of living separately, is past. New life will come with obedience and the choice of us taking risks in ecumenism, that step forward expecting to be blessed when we obey Christ.*

And he concluded:

*My simple challenge to all of us today, is to re-find the spiritual passion of the past for ecumenism; theologically, in solidarity with the suffering, in love that covers a multitude of sins. To do that we must face our fears of each other and of the world together, we must love one another, we must give common witness and work towards a more visible unity that we re-imagine in the grace of God.*

And the more we do that, the more we will realise that love is not about making the other person just like us, but about helping them to be themselves, about affirming and valuing them for who they are and for what they bring to the relationship, of creating a real diversity in unity in which a genuine listening to what others value and believe is what is important so that we can not only **pray** together but *together* we can **work for justice** in the world. And that, after all, is what true ‘be-longing’ is all about.

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