**3rd August 2014**

**Luke 10.25-37**

**Reading David Evans’ book ‘*Dursley a small town at war 1914-18’* it staggers me to think that on Tuesday 4th August 1914 the Dursley Gazette front page said ‘everybody keep Calm, continue your ordinary duties and make it easier for people to do the same. Be economical. Avoid useless excitement and demonstration. If not employed, find something to do around the house, or follow your hobby. Occupy your mind. Sit tight!’ It was announced that the Army was to be mobilized and the next day Wednesday 5th August the army reservists were called up and 130 men from Dursley and Wotton had 24 hours to pack and say goodbye to their families and go off to war - many of them never to return. There are 55 names on Dursley’s war memorial. 19 of those names are listed on our memorial in the Tab which gives an indication of the loss and grief that must have been felt by this congregation during the War to end all wars. Those men went off to war expecting it to be over by Christmas. Today and tomorrow our nation remembers the outbreak of the First World War 100 years ago. We will gather in the church garden for an act of commemoration later.**

**By any stretch of the imagination, war is the opposite of love. In this well-known and possibly over-familiar parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus confirms the two greatest commandments that sum up the law of God. Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. Love your neighbour as you love yourself. War, any war, is a violation of those commands. No matter how you dress it up, appeal to patriotism, talk about the lesser of two evils, or a ‘just’ war, war and violence are a violation of God’s law. Or so you would think. Bring on the lawyers! Lawyers who can debate ‘what does it actually mean to love’? Can love actually mean hate? Can love actually justify war? Do you not have to resist evil? Does not love mean you may have to do unlovely things in the name of protecting the good?**

**I saw on the TV the other night an interview with an Israeli pilot who was trying to justify the bombing of civilians in Gaza**[[1]](#footnote-1) **–**

**‘We are trying to make it safe’ he said.**

**The interviewer queried this remark; ‘By bombing hospitals and schools? How can you sleep at night?’**

**‘I believe I am saving lives’, he said. ‘We have called off many attacks, but I am trying to make Israel and the Palestinians safe.’**

**Forgive me for thinking that this is twisted logic. Maybe the same logic that caused the First World War – let’s have a massive war – it will make us safe?**

The parable of the Good Samaritan arises out of a discussion between Jesus and a lawyer who is asking a question on the nature of the law. **I know some nice lawyers, principled people, seeking to do what is right and be an instrument for justice. But I also have some experience of some not so nice lawyers who are just in it to get the money.**

**This lawyer comes to Jesus and you wonder whether he had a genuine question, a genuine searching heart or whether he was playing games? Luke writes that the lawyer came forward to ‘test Jesus’.**

It was a test question: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.” Jesus answers “What is written?” In other words, use your own mind to discern the essence of the law. Jesus, like a good discussion leader, throws the question right back in his lap.

The lawyer had a good answer. He said: “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” This was a direct quote from Deuteronomy 6. It was part of the Shema, a confession regularly made in Jewish worship. Jesus says: “Excellent. You are correct.” If he were a teacher I suppose he would have said: “You get A+.” I have no complaint with this says Jesus. Do this and you shall live.

The answer itself is deeply challenging to Britain of the twenty first century. The majority of people in our society if they asked the question ‘what must I do to get the best life possible?’ would expect an answer involving, health, happiness, friends and money. God would be well off the radar. Yet the first command is love God – with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – have you done that? Would you pass the test? Then love your neighbour. Most people don’t get past the third base – loving themselves. Some people even struggle to do that – so full are they of self-loathing and self-hatred.

The question had been asked and the expected answer given. You would think that the man would be pleased and go home. But lawyers are never happy. A lawyer’s responsibility is to define the limits of liability. “But he, desiring to justify himself, asked ‘Who is my neighbour.’” In other words, where does my responsibility stop? Who exactly am I responsible for?”

At this point, instead of further defining the question, Jesus tells a story. A way of indirect teaching. He broadens the issue out – not just to define ‘who is your neighbour’ but also what does it mean to ‘love’.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the most well-known parable of Jesus.

Eugene Peterson says, parables are narrative time bombs designed to explode people into new awareness, then in this case one of the pieces of shrapnel is designed to tear into the idea that the law will ever save anybody. Jesus is exposing the futility of the law as a way to inherit eternal life. After all, the Samaritan who finally reached out did so not as a result of law but of grace. The finer points of the law left the man half-dead in the ditch.

The priest and the Levite hurry past when they see the injured man, confounding our assumptions that the ‘holy’ would surely help. To stop would mean risking delay to their journey, and perhaps ritual uncleanliness, robbery, ambush or attack. To them, the risks were too high. Maybe they thought the man was a drunk – it was his own fault that he was in this state. He wasn’t deserving of their help. His own sin had brought this upon him?

The lawyer would probably identify with the priest and the Levite. They would be from the same professional class. They would be concerned with matters of principle, policy, the rules and regulations, good practice. The lawyer would have been sympathetic towards them. Touching a dead or apparently dead man would have made them ritually unclean and therefore would disable their roles in their system of purity, on which the culture of the nation depended. In other words stopping to help would jeopardise their professional status and career. Consequently they are inhibited by the claims of religious duty and the boundaries of their professions to act in mercy. It makes it difficult for them to be neighbours. We all have excuses not to help, not to show mercy, not to love – even religious people!

Martin Luther King said the difference between the priest and the Levite and the Samaritan was that the first two thought ‘if I stop to help what will happen to me’ whereas the Samaritan reversed the question and thought ‘If I don’t stop to help, what will happen to this man?’

The Samaritan counts the sick man’s needs greater than the risks he faces, and stops to help. His decision costs him, in oil and wine for the man’s wounds, and money, for the bed at the inn. Margaret Thatcher, notoriously lectured the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland on this, justifying her wealth creation policies for the wealthy, by saying that ‘no one would remember the Good Samaritan if he only had good intentions but no money’. The facts suggest that in Britain, as people get wealthier they actually give less away to good causes as a proportion of their income.

 We don’t know the Samaritan’s motivation: perhaps he simply recognised that it could easily have been him left by the roadside. Perhaps he wanted to be part of a world in which compassion was shown to all and with his eyes on that goal, knew he had to be willing to show mercy himself.

We live in a risk averse culture. Maybe we fear the lawyers and the blame culture – because if something goes wrong someone is going to try and make money out of it.

Modern dilemmas include how old should your children be before they’re allowed to walk to and from school on their own. Can they play conkers at school, or go out and have snow ball fights at break time, or do competitive games where someone might get injured?

Risks and surprises are part and parcel of life, but most of us do everything we can to minimise their impact on our lives. It’s only natural to want to protect ourselves as far as possible. But focusing too narrowly on risk-reduction can prevent us from growing on our journey through life.

We do know that the Samaritans gift of mercy was appreciated by those who heard the story then, as now. If we, too, aspire to ‘Go and do likewise,’ perhaps we will have to prepare to weigh the risks to ourselves a little lower in the balance than the needs of others and get ready to confound expectations.

The Samaritan had reached out as a result of grace not as a result of the law. Grace was compassion – it didn’t calculate the risk or the cost – it just gave love. The finer points of the law and a risk calculation would have left the man in the ditch.  It leaves us all there. Grace is what lifts the man out. Grace it what lifts all of us out.

A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out. A subjective person came along and said, "I feel for you down there." An objective person came along and said, "It's logical that someone would fall down there." A religious person said, "Only bad people fall into a pit." A mathematician calculated how he fell into the pit. A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on his pit. An Inland Revenue official asked if he was paying taxes on the pit. A self-pitying person said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit." A charismatic Christian said, "Just confess that you're not in a pit." An optimist said, "Things could be worse." A pessimist said, "Things will get worse." Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit!

That’s the gospel. God loves us before we love him. Being a Christian is not about keeping the law – about being a good person. I wish I had a pound for every time I talk with families about the funeral for their loved one and they tell me that that the deceased never hurt anyone, always tried to do good – as if I can put a good word in for them with the almighty. The essence of being a Christian is to know that you are loved. God loves you before you do or don’t love Him, love your neighbour, or love yourself.

Frederick Buechner in his book: The Magnificent Defeat:

*The love for equals is a human thing--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.*

*The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.*

*The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints.*

*And then there is the love for the enemy--love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world.*

If God had not been gracious with us, we'd all still be dead.

There is of course the unwritten shock in the parable of Jesus, a shock only heard by people living in the context of the story, a shock lost on us,. Jesus was speaking to an audience who hated Samaritans, He was asking them to do much more than follow a moral example. Living in God’s kingdom requires such a radical transformation that one must not only accept one’s enemies (indeed, love them), but one must even be prepared to receive aid from the enemy – a most humbling gesture. Giving aid takes work, but receiving aid takes great humility.”

Imagine the Palestinians receiving aid from the Israelis. Imagine the Russians offering to help the Ukrainians. You get the picture. From whom would it be difficult for you to receive compassion? What can we learn from our “enemies”? Which is easier for us, to give help or to receive it.

”Mercy ‘blesseth him that gives and him that takes’, according to Portia in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. Is this true in our experience? Does mercy sometimes benefit both the recipient and the one who offers it?

Imagine what it might be like to live in a society where no one showed mercy — where even the Samaritan walked by. Would you want to live there? Then allow this to act as a challenge to do differently!

Friday we will remember one of our own, Charles Jukes. Chaz did good. He loved his neighbour. He helped to get the open Door Club up and running and was active within it for over thirty years. He was active in Rotary and got involved in numerous charitable projects particularly Eye transplants at Bristol Eye hospital. For his work in the community for others he was awarded the Paul Harris Fellowship Award, a national award from Rotary, the Leslie Gale Award given by Dursley town Council, the Gazette Award for work in the community, and of course an MBE from the Queen. Friday will be a celebration of this man who lived not just for himself but also for his neighbour. A good Samaritan.

This week there has been growing concern at the Ebola virus in West Africa.

Dr Sheik Umar Khan was a leading doctor from Sierra Leone specialising in viral haemorrhagic fever.

He contracted the Ebola virus while treating patients who also had it, and died aged 39 from the disease.

Shortly before he died, he spoke about the risks he and his colleagues face when treating infectious patients.

"Health workers are prone to the disease because we are the first port of call for those with the disease. Even with the full kit we put on we're at risk.

He has been called a "national hero" for his tireless work.

Kent Brantly always wanted to be a medical missionary, and he took the work seriously, spending months treating a steady stream of patients with Ebola in Liberia with Samaritan's Purse, a Christian aid group.

Now Brantly is himself a patient, fighting for his own survival – and has just been taken back to the United States to receive treatment.

 "I'm praying fervently that God will help me survive this disease," Brantly said in an email. Brantly, 33, knew of the risks associated with working in one of the world's poorest countries during an epidemic and did not regret his choice.

"Kent prepared himself to be a lifetime medical missionary," said his mother, Jan Brantly. "His heart is in Africa."

Dr Brantly had been offered experimental serum - using blood from a child whose life he saved - but he had insisted that a colleague who has been infected, should receive it instead.

Remember them in your prayers – good Samaritans.

Love and compassion does not ask, “What does the person deserve?” It asks, “What does this person need?”

Walking in the way of Jesus is to walk in the way of love and compassion. You know you are loved. You know all are loved by God, even your enemies. But walking is something you DO. “DO this, Jesus said, “love God and love your neighbour, including your enemy. DO this, and you will live.” Go and DO likewise…

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28593248> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)