

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 15 Year C 2019

When I was growing up, my family and I lived at the end of a cul-de-sac. My father had bought the land and started building the house just before my parents married. My uncle (Dad's brother) and his wife bought the block next door and there they built their house. So, our immediate neighbours were my uncle and aunt and my 5 cousins. But we knew all the people in our neighbourhood. On the other side of our house was a German couple who owned the jewellery shop in town. Next to my uncle and aunt were another young Dutch family who had a small swimming pool which was great in summer. But further up the road was an older Australian couple. From time to time, my brothers and I would go up and say hello and have a drink with them, and the lady would give us collector cards of birds from the tea packets. We would also wander up the road to say hello to an old widow, and she always had lollies to give. I suspect not many children today wander freely around their streets calling in to have drinks with elderly neighbours. Parents are either too suspicious or the kids are too busy with their afterschool, weekend and even holiday activities. But we had the time and freedom and it was a safe neighbourhood.

Who is our neighbour? I have given one way of addressing the question: the people who live in physical proximity to us. I suppose we all might hope to end up in a good, safe neighbourhood. But we know there are also dangerous, deprived neighbourhoods. Every large town and city has them: streetscapes that are poorly looked after; houses that are shabby; land that is cheap. So, we might have good neighbours: whom we know and like; who call by for a cuppa; who keep their yard neat and tidy; who pass you excess goodies from their vege garden. But we might also have 'bad' neighbours: who might be different from us; who come from a different class or background; who have noisy parties and are unemployed; who have riotous children and barking dogs. Or barking children and riotous dogs... They say you can choose your friends but not your family. Often, we can't choose our neighbours either.

The Gospel placed before us today also asks of us the question, *who is my neighbour?* The question is posed to Jesus by a smug, self righteous lawyer, an expert in the intricacies and complexities of Jewish life and practice. He is confident that in observing the *externals* of his faith, all will be fine. But Jesus - who has little tolerance for either smugness or superficiality - tells the story which we so know and love.

The trouble for us is that we have become so familiar with the title and idea of the 'good Samaritan.' We are used to hearing those two words - 'good' and 'Samaritan' - placed next to each other that we forget that for the first hearers of this story that the very concept was completely new and strange and, frankly, scandalous. For the first century Jew there was no such thing as a 'good' Samaritan. In their mind such a person didn't exist, it was beyond the realms of possibility. We might imagine the idea as strange as a 'good terrorist' or a good 'drug dealer'. We wouldn't naturally associate the word 'good' with either of them!

The lawyer to whom Jesus tells this story has placed his trust in faithfully observing the externals of his faith. The priest and Levite in the story, also Jews who are supposed to faithfully observe the externals of their faith, are seen to walk past the man who has been beaten and left for dead. To be sure *they are* doing the right thing. *They are* observing the letter of the law. To touch a bloodied body and perhaps a corpse, would be to make them unclean, and would prevent them from exercising their religious duties. *They do not wish to be contaminated.*

We might suppose that when Jesus introduces the Samaritan to the story those first hearers would have supposed, well, he will walk on by too. He's a Samaritan, after all... But no! While the beaten and dying man is ignored and rejected *by his own people*, by those who might be thought to be his neighbour, it is the outsider - the despised foreigner - who proves the true neighbour!

So often in our civic - as well as our religious life - when we ask, *who is my neighbour?* we answer, *someone like me...* The temptation to limit, to restrict, to shrink notions of who might our neighbour be is an ever-present threat. Now, certain voices in our world and in our nation and even in our church would like us to choose fear and isolationism and exclusivity. But surely, as people of faith, and disciples of Jesus Christ, we ought to choose the path of openness and acceptance and compassion, even if it's uncomfortable and demands much of us. We can choose this! Or we can choose to walk past, to keep clear, to keep ourselves uncontaminated, to not let our hands get dirty.

But, my brothers and sisters, Christianity is a dirty religion! It demands we get up close and personal. It is not a faith for the timid! It is a faith of the Cross, and the demands of the Cross are bloody and dirty. The Samaritan, moved with compassion, gets up close and personal: he binds wounds, anoints the strange foreigner he has come across. He accommodates him and pays his expenses. He chooses to not be limited by safe, and predictable notions of who is his neighbour. He is not concerned about self-preservation or nervously guarding his own self. There is certain recklessness in his actions. He chooses to follow his heart. Not his fears. And his heart is open and generous.

My friends, as we look forward in faith and hope to our future together, we can surely look for guidance and inspiration in the image presented to us in the gospel today. There will be difficult parts on road ahead, times when we need to attend to each other and bind each other's wounds. And times when *we need to accept* the healing ministrations of others. And we have to be careful to not settle only on what is known and familiar. The smug self-assurance of the lawyer cautions us against this. Settling upon externals of faith – however they are expressed – is a poor excuse for faith. And we must not be afraid of getting our hands dirty, in either our recklessness, our generosity or the love we share.

In times of change and uncertainty we know the danger is to withdraw and disengage and to put all our efforts towards survival and (mostly mean-spirited and grumpy) self-preservation. This is a risk most of the western church now faces and probably the risk we face. I would suggest to you that is not the way of Jesus Christ. That is not the way of life. We can be a living sign of God's love in the world. We can be engaged, positive, optimistic about our future. If we don't believe that – that we have good news to live and share; if can't hope for that – well, then, we might as well all walk out now, turn off the lights, close the doors, and not bother.

But of the openness, mercy and love the Samaritan shows, our Lord Christ says, *go and do likewise*. It's not presented as an option in the pick-and-choose smorgasbord of contemporary spiritual life. It's a command! *Go and do it!!* As we journey forward, let the open heart of the Samaritan be ours. Let us be open to each other. Let us be open to the challenges ahead. Let us be open to the profound needs around us. Let us be open to receive the graces offered to us. And let us open to the adventure of bringing Christ's healing peace and love to our neighbourhood. Amen.