

Sermon Notes for Trinity XIII

“and thy neighbour as thyself” (gospel)

It is easy to accept what seems to be the message of this gospel reading at a sentimental level. But that is not good enough. Let us assume that none of the travellers could be sure whether the victim was dead or not. If he was dead, there was a clear Jewish duty to bury the dead, even though in so doing one became “unclean” (which is a ritual and not a moral category). But there might be other duties. A priest, and also indeed a levite, might be committed to temple duties which could not be discharged if unclean. There are indeed some duties to others which have to be weighed in a conflict of obligations. On the other hand, if the man was not dead, there was no (immediate) risk of becoming unclean. Then there was an undoubted duty to help – though even then there might be other duties. Not least, the obligations to others which exposing oneself to serious risk of assault might jeopardise. Humanitarian training in this evil world sometimes has to discourage the action of the “good Samaritan”. Yet we, surely following the Lord, instinctively think that the Samaritan did well and the other travellers badly. The Lord expects us to take risks on behalf of others who we do not know. I have, very occasionally, done so. (This is not much of a boast.) But given my other commitments, for example as a husband, was I wise – or moral?

There is a wider point here, which is the concept of “neighbour”. The questioner rightly recalled, as we do every service, the summary of the Torah (Leviticus 19.18, and also inherent in several of the Ten Words). There seems to be an implication that those who are not neighbours are owed some lower standard, though it is nowhere said in the Old Testament (in spite of Matthew 5.43) that we should hate our enemies, or even that we are free to do so.

Indeed, there are several passages in the Old Testament which impose a clear duty to help even an enemy (Exodus 23.4-5 is unambiguous). Do not imagine, therefore, that the Lord is imposing a new standard (though he may well be giving added force to an existing but little regarded duty) in commanding us to love even our enemies (and if so, how much more the many who are neither neighbour nor enemy?) Love is not a sentiment here, but how one behaves.

The questioner's stance is then that I certainly have positive duties to my neighbours, and the remaining problem is to identify them. There are many now who would not acknowledge as much as this. But as is widely remarked, the Lord does not answer that question. Presumably because it is the wrong question. Not, however, completely wrong. The duties which a generous person discharges to a neighbour are indeed duties; the relationship is indeed a good. If indeed we are to seek moral generalisations from the Lord's teaching (and this may be a mistake because I doubt that the Lord came to give lessons in moral philosophy) then the moral lesson would be that the “neighbour” relationship is to be extended to everybody – and not thereby diluted.

What is the point of introducing a Samaritan? Note that it is not said that the victim was a Jew and so in his eyes (as the Jews commonly imagined) an enemy. (How could he tell?) Obviously the others who passed by were Jews. The implied argument is by extension. If even a (half-pagan) Samaritan can recognise the call to be a neighbour to an unconnected person even at personal risk and personal cost, so much the more ought a Jew. Or, for Luke in recording this story, a gentile Christian. The same instinct had led the Pharisees (originally a lay movement) to adopt the same standards of ritual purity which were binding on priests, so it was possible to argue in this way.

“Go, and do thou likewise”. This is one of the most savage conclusions in the gospels. The questioner – which implies each of us - is not called to moral assent, as if a clever trick question had received a compelling put down, but to practice. The Lord offers no lower standard to the questioner – or to us – than his own behaviour. He would have dealings with Samaritans. He would heal them. This is, one might say, the very start of the universal mission of the gospel. We are not allowed exclusivity. We cannot choose those who the Lord will call, but must accept them and the problems they bring.

The Lord acknowledges no limits. He lived what he preached – and he died. We fall short. Sometimes, we think we have reasons, such as conflicting obligations. Maybe we have. But we have to recognise how far we fall short of His standards, his example.