

Trinity 3 sermon by Andrew 14 July 2019 Victim and Rescuer

Luke 10: 25-37

You might remember that Maggie Thatcher had her own famous (or infamous) take on the story of the Good Samaritan: “No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well”. In other words the significance of this story of the Good Samaritan's compassion is that he had the capital to do it. Now I don't know whether the Samaritan had an ISA or an offshore bank account or what, but I do know that this isn't a story about the benefits of prudent investment. Anything but.

So let's look at this story from a different angle. You're the poor man on the ground, lying there naked and bleeding, you can barely move and every part of you aches, you're humiliated and abused to the point where you're almost past caring, drifting in and out of consciousness.

Along comes this priest. The thought flits through the priest's head that maybe he ought to do something about you but he's on his way to an important international conference on pastoral care, so he'd better not stop. Besides he doesn't want you bleeding on him, and of course there's always the possibility that you may be ritually impure – tainted, so on he goes, quickly, on the other side.

Likewise the levite appears. Levites had a responsibility for making sure that the ritual and religious rules of the Temple were followed down to the last detail. Everything done just right. So just as for the priest so this is a man whose life is dominated by the Law, and the million and one do's and don'ts that went with it. In a flash his analytical mind sums up all the possibilities of why you are lying on the ground, beaten to a pulp and naked. Clearly you left without an escort. This is a notoriously dangerous road and any fool knows you don't set off on your own.

Moreover you've probably done something, indeed you must have done something, to deserve this. This is embedded in everything he's ever learned about justice. So the Samaritan must be paying the price for something he's done.

So question: would you want to be rescued by these people? Thank God for the Samaritan. Because here comes someone who has probably had to put up with vilification and rejection all his life. Samaritans were regarded as Jews gone wrong, heretics. So he knows what it is like to be beaten up, at least verbally, if not physically.

And this is what I love about the Gospel. It's full of characters who have no business being in a respectable religious text – except for the fact that Jesus puts them there centre stage. Gentile astrologers, disreputable women, quisling tax collectors, fishermen and shepherds, a Good Thief impertinent enough to ask Jesus for a place in Paradise, a Roman Centurion who, with the blood of crucifixion on his hands, says: truly this man was the Son of God; Mary Magdalene – another of *those* women – who actually gets to be the herald

of the Resurrection. These are people in the raw, as exposed in who they are as the naked guy mugged on the road to Jericho.

For me, this is a Gospel with which I resonate so deeply. If I'm in trouble I look for someone I know has been roughed up a bit by life, someone who will not feel tainted by my failures or start judging me for whatever has happened. I reckon that for most of us when you almost feel like you've been mugged by life, you don't need analysis, you need compassion, someone who will literally feel with you – enter into your experience just as much as they can, even if they don't understand, not necessarily saying anything, but just being there.

The fact is that people don't always find this easy, because other people's pain can be scary. I've met bereaved people over the years whose friends have actually crossed to the other side of the road because they didn't know what to say to them. You know, grief is not a communicable disease, but with some people you would think it was exactly that. After death or divorce it's not uncommon for people to find that they somehow fall through and out of the social networks they used to have – almost as if they become invisible.

And that is why this story, like the story of the Prodigal Son say, lies at the heart of the Gospel. Forget doctrine, if you want a reason to go on being a Christian this'll do. At least it does for me. Christianity puts the invisible, the ignored, the rejected, absolutely centre stage. Neither the victim nor the Samaritan has a name, but they don't need them. Your name will do for either one, or both. Jesus is both.

The incarnation is all about the divine being visible in the invisible and rejected victim, the failure, the clown who should know better – and we've all been there; and visible also as Saviour, healer, intercessor and friend – and we can be those as well. This is the mess and the glory in which we all share. Was there ever a more risky thing to do than God becoming flesh? Even worse than setting off on that road to Jericho. He didn't stand a chance. But could there be a more powerful expression of the love that beats at the heart of the universe than God visible in the victim – of all people; and in the Samaritan – of all people. It's a heck of a way to make a point, but thankfully, for all our sakes, it's true.