

WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOUR? 15TH SUNDAY C

We hear the words *'A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho'*. We know at once that they begin the famous parable of the Good Samaritan, told just now one more time. To understand and appreciate the parable we must remember that Jesus told it as his answer to the question put to him: *'Who is my neighbour?'*

In the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus, there was much discussion about just who is a Jewish person's neighbour. It was generally thought that one's neighbour is restricted to those who are born Jewish and those who have become Jewish. With his choice of a Samaritan who gives striking practical assistance to the wounded Jewish man, Jesus is asserting that our neighbour is simply every other human being in need. So the idea of neighbour goes way beyond our family, our friends, our work-mates, our fellow citizens, our political party, our comfort zones and our church. Jesus is asserting that even our enemy is our neighbour too. (At the time Jesus was telling his story, Jews and Samaritans were, in fact, deadly enemies).

So Jesus is teaching by his parable that no one at all must be excluded from our care and concern, but also that our love of neighbour must be concrete and practical. How does the Samaritan behave in the parable? If he had been content to say to the wounded and bleeding man: *'Bad luck, Buddy! They've knocked you around! Cheer up! It could be worse! You could be dead!'*, and then galloped off, that would have been callous, cruel, and insulting. Instead he puts himself out by doing everything he possibly can, for the man who fell among thieves. As Jesus tells us:

But a Samaritan traveller who came upon him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him on to his own mount, carried him to the inn and looked after him. Next day he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and on my way back I will make good any extra expense you have."

At the end of the parable Jesus puts this question to the one who questioned him: *'Which of these, the Levite, the priest, or the Samaritan, showed himself to be a real neighbour to the wounded man?'* He gets the answer he was looking for: *'The one who took pity on the wounded one.'*

In our lives, then, the neighbour we are called to love is, in a nutshell, the person who needs me now - right here, right now. We must not discriminate. We must not pick and choose. We must not wait either till he or she appears along our way, perhaps quite dramatically. God asks us to be on the look-out for them, to focus on them, and then support them generously with our compassion, time, trouble, and money.

In his beautiful book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Emeritus Benedict suggests a challenging application of the parable. In the victim who was robbed, wounded, and left for dead on the

side of the road, he sees represented the entire continent of Africa. He sees in us, members of one of the richest nations on earth, the two professionals crossing to the other side of the road - too caught up in our own schedules, agendas and concerns, to get involved.

I'm convinced that if Jesus came to Israel today and again a lawyer were to ask him, '*Who is my neighbour?*' he would change the parable a bit. In place of the Samaritan he would put a Palestinian! But If a Palestinian were to ask him the same question, in the Samaritan's place we would find a Jew!

But it's just too easy to limit the discussion to Africa and the Middle East. If any one of us today were to put to Jesus the question '*Who is my neighbour?*', what would he answer? He would certainly remind us that our neighbour is not only our fellow countrymen but also those outside our nation and community, not only Christians but Muslims as well, not only Catholics but Protestants too, and not only believers but people also with no religious faith. But he would immediately add that the most important thing is not simply to know who my neighbour is. The most important thing is to show what it means to love my neighbour, the person i.e., whoever it may be, who needs me and needs me now. '*Go and be the Good Samaritan to them, and go now,*' Jesus would surely be saying to you and me.

In our Eucharist today, let us pray for the grace we surely need to respond generously and consistently to the clear and challenging teaching of Jesus our Guide, both on who my neighbour is, and on how to care for them!

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