

Sermon Archive 523

Sunday 16 February, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Luke 10: 25-37

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



For all the wrong reasons, an expert in the law asked exactly the right question: "what is at the heart of faith?" It is a question which, if explored faithfully, has the potential to bring peace to the person, and harmony to society.

Maybe Jesus suspects that the question's a trap, so doesn't want to offer anything that can be used against him. Or maybe he, who's inclined to teach with parables and answer questions with more questions, knows that the questioner will benefit from more opportunity to think. His question in reply is "what is written in the law? What do you read there?"

See, you already have access to ancient wisdom. Though maybe sometimes your handling of it is clumsy, or manipulative, it *is* available. You can hear the stories of people who went from slavery to freedom. You can hear the songs of your ancestors, their weeping and rejoicing. You can read the words of the prophets, the strange inspired ones who arrested the ear and the conscience. You can peep into their vision and hope. All this comes to you as a gift from the God who knows your heart and says "I have shown you, O mortal, what is good". "What is written in the law" asks Jesus; "what do you read there?" A very good question to very good question.

From the expert, here comes a very good **answer**,. "Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbour as yourself".

Since Jesus calls it the **"right"** answer, we set to imagining the kind of life where heart, soul, strength and mind are all in the right place - set like jewels in the frame of the God who made them to serve the chief end of humanity. No warring between mind and heart, but a perfect loving dialogue. Strength overcoming any attack. Soul engaged with all-healing grace. And peace among people: strangers made neighbours. For this is what the expert in the law has **read** about.

Church Councils have read about it too - as have congregations. As have many within those congregations. As have private Christians in parts of the world where they're not allowed to assemble. As have bored travelling salesmen in the olden days when the motel TV was on the blink and there was only one book in the top drawer next to the bed. The law has been **given**, a gift from a God who knows that we have the capacity, in one way or another, to read.

Is reading enough?

In this instance, reading proves **not** to be enough. For immediately after the expert quotes from what he has read, then wants to vindicate himself. Vindicate? Prove. Win. Defeat his opponent. Make of the other (whom he is called to love, and from whom he could learn) a "loser". And so a third question - again a good one, full of potential, but asked in a wrong and hostile spirit. "Who is my neighbour?"

-ooOoo-

If we were asked to describe the crime that featured in the parable, most likely we would say it was an act of robbery. And most probably, if asked to say why we described it as "robbery", we'd say it's because the criminals are described as "robbers".

David Tombs is the Director of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago. In an article about the parable of the Good Samaritan, he quotes from the work of Andrew Graystone, a British writer, activist and broadcaster. Noting Jesus' description of the "robbery", Graystone notes that it's an odd "robbery" that leaves someone stripped of their clothes. Graystone considers a more accurate word to describe this kind of crime would be "assault". He then goes on to talk about a **first** assault, and a **second** assault.

Quoting from Tombs:

In the first assault, by the thieves, the man is robbed of his property, his clothing, his dignity. In the second assault, by the Priest and the Levite, he is robbed of his identity, his self-worth, and his hope for recovery. This is contrasted with the grace evidenced in the relationship between the victim and the Samaritan. The stripping is an important element in both assaults. It is important in the first assault because it is part of the initial crime. The victim already has multiple needs when the Samaritan arrives in the story. The victim is wounded, alone, naked and humiliated. He has suffered not just physical injuries, but the denigration and shame of forcible stripping as well. The second assault then compounds this harm. The injured man is treated by the Priest and Levite as if he does not really matter. The Priest and the Levite see this predicament, but despite this, they do nothing to help. Graystone makes an insightful connection between the injured man and the experiences of those who have suffered abuse in church contexts in recent times. Graystone explains the nature of abuse is to strip the victim of their personhood. He suggests that churches that do not respond appropriately to those who

have been abused repeat the failure of the Priest and the Levite . . .

It's interesting that both the Priest and Levite, like the person who's hearing a parable made up especially in response to his hostile question, have read the law. They know the law, which should, in the best of all possible worlds have been written on their hearts. Reading the law, it seems, is not enough. It needs to be lived.

On this third Sunday in our late summer Season of Caring, we have appointed some people to assist with nurturing a "community of care" in this place. We have heard that loving God and neighbour is a fine thing to **read** about. We face, also though, the challenge of living the life about which we have read.

May God be in our hearts, our souls, our strength and our minds, that we might live.

Amen.