

I'd like to thank Steve again for this invitation to preach with you in this week of prayer for Christian unity. We are neighbours: we share opposite sides of the street and as we look to the future, and hopefully when the pandemic become increasingly endemic, I'm really hopeful about the future that we'll be able to grow in relationship with each other as fellow Christians and as neighbours. And I'm excited about what we can do together to witness to the faith we share and be a blessing to Woodside.

So as I thought about the message. I was going to share this morning I was led to reflect on one of Luke's great parables: the parable of the Good Samaritan. So as we prepare to hear this familiar story again let us pray.

Heavenly Father we thank you that you are with us now. And we thank you for the gift of Christ's word. May his word always assure us, challenge us, inspire us and form us as we seek to be faithful as your people and good neighbours in this community. Amen

So our reading today is Luke's gospel chapter 10 beginning at verse 25.

[Reading Luke 10:25-37]

This parable is probably the most famous of the stories that Jesus told and it's one of those few parables that people outside of the church might know and like most. The story that has much to commend itself whether people have faith or not, and it's one of the few biblical stories that might still be welcome in a school assembly, because it's a story that's about showing kindness and taking risks; it's a story that disrupts prejudice and urges us not to discriminate against people or prejudice. It's a story that about being surprised by hope and finding compassion in unexpected places when you've been disappointed by those whom you had trusted. And of course, the villains of the story are those hypocritical religious characters: the priest who walks by on the other side when he should have helped, who failed to lead by example, so that the Levite who followed him also walked on by.

But in this telling of the story that emphasizes what are (and I think in our world) quite easy and uncontroversial values, we can miss just how radical and scandalous this story of Jesus is, and we can miss the grace and the good news that is at its heart. I think sometimes, as people of faith, we can end up reading this story in the primary school assembly sort of way wondering if we've been good enough not to be like the villainous priest or Levite. And so this Parable can get left in the children's bible or for the school assembly, a story told by Jesus the good moral teacher not Jesus our Saviour, Lord and friend; and we don't engage with it as much as we could.

This story begins with a lawyer asking Jesus what is perhaps a strange question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's a strange questions because it brings together two quite contrasting concepts: earning from labour, an inheritance (which always comes as a gift). As Christians and as people of faith we know that there is nothing we can do to earn God's love: that nothing we can do will make God loves us any more or less. We know that we cannot impress God by virtue. And Salvation always, always comes as a gift.

So the story that Jesus tells us in response is not really about what we *must do*, it's more about *how* we could live if we were less defensive, less suspicious or fearful of risk, or if our priorities were closer in line with the kingdom he proclaimed. Often when we look at this story we assume

that the sin of the priest and the Levite in it is hypocrisy – the failure to practice what they preached. In our world today I think hypocrisy is one of the things that angers us the most, isn't it? We look at the news stories about the goings on in Downing Street during the pandemic; what has angered people is not so much the riskiness of the behaviour in question but the entitlement of it, and the sense that the powerful and important didn't obey the rules that were given to the rest of us. Sometimes you can always feel like “as long as someone has authenticity and is genuine they can be really horrible, and that's fine 'cause they're just being themselves”, but when it comes to hypocrisy then we get angry.

But if we see the priest and Levite in our story just as religious hypocrites, I think we really missing the point. For there may have been more than hypocrisy or hardness of heart in their failure to stop and help. There could have been fear: they might have feared that it was a trap, that if they stopped and helped that they might be ambushed too; and there may also have been fears that in stopping and in helping that they will become ritually unclean so they couldn't then fulfil their religious duties properly.

All through the Hebrew bible (all through our Old Testament) the call to holiness for God's people is emphasized time and again: “Be Holy for the Lord your God is Holy.” When Isaiah is called the vision of God's holiness is so overwhelming it makes him fearful because he is aware that he is a man of unclean lip from a people of unclean lips, yet he has seen the Lord of Glory. Sometimes this holiness was seen in being distinctive in the people not having a king, not worshipping idols. Sometimes that holiness was expressed in blessing, being a people who would welcome and provide for the stranger, the orphan, the widow and the Refugee.

But at other times this holiness was expressed in separation, in keeping aloof and apart from other tribes and cultures and faiths, and not really mixing with them. Indeed, the separation of Jews and Samaritans, and the enmity and distrust between them, can be understood in this way: they shared so much as people – they had a common faith story they shared and were neighbours in a land – but each claimed to be the only authentic and genuine inheritors of the face of ancient Israel, and each group challenged the genuineness and integrity of the other as if not being totally pure.

Ideas of holiness and purity were important questions when it came to worship. So when the priest in Jesus' story doesn't stop and help, it's not necessary that he's a hypocrite who won't do the right thing if no one else is watching, it might be because he's actually prioritising his own ritual purity over the needs of the man in the ditch.

Time and again through the gospels Jesus shows how unafraid he is of being made ritually unclean: he lets the woman with the haemorrhage reach out and touch him, he lets the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee pour perfume on his feet and dry them with her hair, he goes the tomb of Lazarus and asks for it to be opened. Our natural instinctive reaction against the behaviour of the priest and Levite urges us to challenge any ideas of holiness that fixate on purity over humanity; for this is where that kind of thinking leads – and it leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth!

Jesus, though, shows us that holiness isn't so fragile or brittle that it needs protecting or gentle handling; instead of being made damaged or unclean by the outside world, his holiness actually transforms it bringing healing and wholeness, and opening up new possibilities for our lives with the promise of new life. In Jesus we see holiness and humanity brought together. You see it in the way in which he speaks in his parables through human images of generosity, of kindness, of

forgiveness and Grace; you see it in the way in which he pays real attention to people and delights in them for who they are and who they might become.

Our call to holiness as Christians shouldn't make us less individual, less ourselves or less human, but more so. And I think this is important because so many people today have a negative picture of Christians seeing us as reactionary or as judgemental – a few years ago in one of the primary schools in which I do assemblies there was opposition from some of the parents for me going in and teaching simple Bible stories. Just as Jesus needed to tell the story of the Good Samaritan to challenge those prejudices, perhaps people today need more than ever to encounter the reality of the good Christian. This story is so valuable and it is full of grace – it might surprise us that the Good Samaritan was not only presented as an exemplar of goodness to follow but was actually seen in the ancient church as a parable and a metaphor for Christ himself, that he, that Jesus is the true Good Samaritan who reaches out to us when we are broken and risks so much to make us whole.

So when we hear this familiar, familiar story we should not always see ourselves in just the place of the Samaritan or in the place of the priest or the Levite; if we're honest there might sometimes be times when we find ourselves like the man in the ditch in need of compassion, love and care. And this story challenges us not just to be like the Good Samaritan but to welcome love and care when we're in need even if it comes from people who surprise us or who even might make us feel a bit uncomfortable.

To reflect on this story and seek to respond to it: I'm so aware of the situation we find ourselves in as churches at the start of this new year. The last two years have been so disruptive to our life and we may be fearful about the uncertainties of the future: so we recover and rebuild, worrying about whether people will return. It can be very tempting in situations like this to turn inwards, to be preoccupied internally about what happens on Sundays or focusing on prioritising my relationship with familiar faces, but my prayer for us as Christians in Woodside is that we will resist that temptation and that we will commit to walking together in faith and hope and love, that instead we will have an open hearted and an expansive vision of God's holiness and who our neighbours truly are, that our understanding of holiness to grow our humanity and loving attention to all people in our community around us.

So my prayer as we look to the future is that we will be known in this community for being good neighbours working together for the common good, and that at here and at St Luke's people might encounter the compassion, and the mercy, and the wholeness and fullness of life that we find in Jesus our Lord, Amen