Sermon for 15th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

i

We don’t usually ask questions to which we already know the answer. We sometimes do it to children to check their understanding or pronunciation. When we ask adults questions we already know the answer to it is usually to catch them out, or test their honesty. The lawyer’s question to Jesus is such a question.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” asks the lawyer, hoping to catch Jesus out in some act of blasphemy. In fact he already knows the answer, as he shows when Jesus unexpectedly turns the question back on him. He cites the Jewish Shema: Love God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.”

“Do this and you will live,” replies Jesus. So the lawyer launches another attack from a different angle. He knows Jesus has a reputation for making friends with unsavoury and questionable people; Jesus associates with tax collectors, eats with Samaritans, defends prostitutes and heals gentiles. The lawyer is pretty sure he has worked out who his neighbour is, but has Jesus an acceptable notion of who is neighbour? Perhaps the lawyer can put Jesus in a bad light through association.

In the following parable of the Good Samaritan, perhaps Jesus’ most famous parable, Jesus can be seen to turn the tables on this scheming lawyer, and put him in the dock of divine judgement instead.

ii

We will all be surely aware of the traditional hostility between Samaritan and Jew. We do not need to delve into the historical details to realise that choosing a Samaritan to offer the robbed man at the side of the road a helping hand was the intentionally shocking climax of the parable. That a Samaritan could love his neighbour better than a priest or Levite is a challenge to the lawyer and the religious hierarchy he represents.

The Samaritan treats the man lying at the side of the road, clearly in need, as his neighbour. Loving his neighbour, despite his neighbour being a Jew, the Samaritan fulfils the Law and therefore will find salvation.

The priest and Levite, the very epitome of religious purity in the eyes of the lawyer, do not treat even a fellow Jew who is obviously in urgent need as a neighbour. The implication is that they, for all their ritual purity and knowledge of the Law, will not know salvation because they do not keep the Law they profess to know.

How has this come about? Jesus confirms the Jewish Shema, but condemns the way in which people like the lawyer, priest and Levite are supposedly practising it.

In this way, Jesus has come to fulfil the Law, to show them what true love of God and love of neighbour looks like.

For the lawyer, priest and Levite have chosen to limit who they will deem to be their neighbour and they have created the Law itself to put a limit upon love; that is the central irony of Jesus’ clash with the lawyers, priests, Levites and Pharisees.

There is nothing wrong with the faith of Abraham, it is just the way that faith is being understood and practised that needs a complete transformation.

For the lawyer and the priest and the Levite, the man set upon by robbers is unclean because he is naked and also because he might be dead. They would also have considered the Samaritan unclean, but not just because he was a Samaritan; being wealthy enough to possess oil and wine and money to pay for an inn, he would have been a merchant – and merchants were despised somewhat like tax collectors, for being money-grabbing and unscrupulous.

The inn keeper in the parable would also have been deemed unclean by a priest or Levite. Inn keepers were held in an even lower social standing than merchants. Inn keepers allowed all and sundry to come under their roofs, with all sorts of unsavoury characters and foreigners eating and sleeping under their roof. People of respectable backgrounds would stay with respectable people and usually with a relative, however distantly related.

Therefore, a lawyer, priest or Levite would find no one in the parable worthy of being treated as a neighbour – not the victim of the robbery, not the Samaritan, not even the inn keeper. Yet they professed to be the ones worthy of salvation!

When Jesus concludes the encounter with the lawyer by telling him to “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37), Jesus is not simply saying, go away and be kind to people, but is saying go away and interpret the Law in the same generous and compassionate way as the Samaritan. Otherwise, those who think they are keeping the Law faithfully like the lawyers, priests and Levites will find they are in breach of the Law and have no salvation, whilst those they condemn as being outside the Law because they are deemed unclean for various reasons, are actually the ones who are keeping the Law and will find salvation.

iii

The lawyer is not the only one challenged to mend his ways by this famous parable. It should make everyone who ever hears it feel uncomfortable.

The parable challenges all of us to refrain from the all too natural, and therefore sinful, tendency we have to put our own artificial limits upon love. We are all tempted, whatever our professed creed, to limit our compassion to those who are like us, to those whose actions we approve, to those who merit love by passing some often unconscious prejudice of how respectable and worthy of compassion we find them.

The cross of Jesus shows us the extent of true love of God and of neighbour. The cross condemns what we usually offer as love and shows our love to be superficial, discriminatory and self-interested in so many circumstances.

The cross calls for each of one us to repent over the shallowness of our love for God and neighbour. We are urged to reach out beyond the false limits we have set and love all those who are created in the image of God.

Jesus said: “Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you’ (Luke 6:27-28). Love without limits is the greatest demand placed upon us. We all fall short – and can only achieve what we do achieve, in the strength of God through the Holy Spirit.

Amos was one of those prophets of the Old Testament who tried to get the people to see all this for themselves.

Amos visited the northern kingdom, Israel, on business some time during the eighth century before Christ. He saw the active and no doubt profitable religious sanctuaries at work at Gilgal and Bethel, whilst the poor were being exploited and their plight ignored.

He tried to warn Israel of the consequences. In religious terms, God would punish them for their wicked disregard of their neighbours – their own poor and lower social classes.

In secular terminology, Amos recognised that the body politic was rotten, the nation divided and weak, the aristocracy vain and out of touch. Such societies cannot stand up to sudden, violent shocks – they collapse like a house of cards as we have seen across eastern Europe when the Iron Curtain fell down, to name but one example of many.

Amos’ prediction of total disintegration of the country proved accurate. Within a generation, Israel had been swallowed up by their aggressive northern neighbour, Assyria. The northern kingdom of Israel did not heed Amos’ warning any more than they listened to Elijah when he protested against the treatment of Naboth.

Loving God with all your heart and what it means to love your neighbour are not just religious concerns, as modern secularists would like to think. Morals and beliefs have social, economic and political consequences.

I write this on the day after Pope Francis published his Encyclical *Laudate Si* on the care of the environment. This morning on CNN I witnessed an economist asking what the purpose of the Pope’s intervention could be, and what morals had to do with such matters.

That commentator, whether he was being serious or just eliciting a response from his interviewee or whichever, will one day see that all of life is a moral question for as long as life presents us with choices that have to be made. What people believe to be true, what people believe to be their responsibility to God, if any, and what people believe to be their obligations to their neighbour, will shape the very continuance of human civilisation itself.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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