

Sermon: St James, Cambridge Trinity 7 14 July 2013

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

Deuteronomy 30.9-14

Ps. 25.1-10

Colossians 1.1-14

Luke 10.25-37

It was on the campus of Stirling University in the late 70's that I was with a group of people amongst whom was an 8 year-old Israeli boy, the son of visiting academics, so he came from an intelligent, informed and sophisticated background. Someone happened to mention Arabs and the effect on the child was startling, his face twisted into a mask of contemptuous hatred and he hissed out *Arabs* in much the same tone as a member of the Nazi Youth movement might have said the word *Jews*.

In the late 70's a frequent visitor to our home was a Muslim, Ibrahim, whose parents had taken refuge in Turkey after the Arab-Israeli conflict when the Jewish state was being established. Ibrahim was here studying for a post-graduate degree in economics. He was intelligent, widely read and Westernised. I was shocked when in one conversation he said that he thought Hitler had done a good job and it was a pity he had been prevented from completing the destruction of the Jews.

I think of those two every time I read of another failed attempt to achieve peace in the Middle East. They gave me insight into the magnitude of the task facing anyone attempting to mediate between these two communities.

It is something like this which formed the background to our Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan. The Jews and the Samaritans detested and treated each other as if they were vermin.

When I preached two weeks ago on ploughing a straight furrow the gospel narrative contained an account of Jesus and his disciples seeking hospitality from a Samaritan village, hospitality is a sacred duty amongst Semitic people, but the Samaritans refused to extend it to these hungry, tired Jews who were heading for Jerusalem. The response of these first Christian disciples was to ask our Lord to do what Elijah did to the prophets of Baal - call down fire from heaven to incinerate them. That's not too far from the gas chambers, is it?

The context to the parable of the Good Samaritan was a question intended to expose Jesus as a fraud or a heretic. A lawyer asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus turned the question back on him, *What do you think you should do?* The lawyer gives the stock rabbinic answer which any orthodox Jew would have given, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.* Jesus agrees with him and commends him. The lawyer suspects he has been out-manoeuvred, but he has a trump card up his sleeve, *Ah*, he adds, *but who is my neighbour.* Maybe he hoped to expose Jesus as being sympathetic to the Romans.

The answer he receives demolishes him - A Jew falls among thieves on the notoriously dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Two other Jews, both representative of their religion, pass him by, not because they lack compassion but because it is unclear whether he

is dead or alive and to touch a dead body is to be rendered ritually unclean. Here is a conflict between the ethics of the Mosaic law and the ethics of love.

Jesus confronts the lawyer with the possibility that a semi-pagan foreigner might know more about the love of God than a devout Jew blinded by his preoccupation with pettifogging rules. It is as one commentator writes, *neighbourliness not neighbourhood which makes a neighbour*.

And then comes the punchline: *Go and do thou likewise*.

The lawyer must have slunk away vowing never to stick his neck out again when it came to questioning this disturbing religious teacher.

I imagine all of you share my delight at his comeuppance. Except that my delight is short-lived, for the words he addressed to the lawyer are also addressed to me. And there are many times when I have fallen far short of the demanding standards of Jesus, but have witnessed others who do not share my faith, and indeed may have no faith at all, meeting those standards far better than myself.

Our Lord is making the discomfiting observation that someone whose religion, race, way of life may be utterly alien to me, indeed whom I might despise, may know more about Christian compassion than I do myself.

One of the more disturbing descriptions that has been applied to Jesus is *the man for others*, a description which Dietrich Bonhoeffer both commended and exemplified. But although he himself finished up a martyr hanged from a meat hook in a Gestapo cellar he was at pains to emphasise that our attempts to follow our Lord's example do not involve *infinite and unattainable tasks*.

In this he is merely underlining our Lord's own teaching, Jesus said that we will be ultimately judged on whether or not we have given a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty or visited someone who is sick.

My Christian pilgrimage began within a community preoccupied with the early Methodist doctrine of Holiness or Christian perfection. Smoking and drinking were forbidden, as was dancing, the pictures and the theatre. There were many admirable people in that community but they tended to define their faith by what they didn't do, not by what they did. One of the church members was Bertha, a funny little old lady, shabby, a bit smelly and who suffered from a speech defect, she spluttered rather than spoke. She was a simple, harmless old soul. Bertha was also losing her sight and had to have drops in her eyes daily. Rita, my late wife, a student nurse, took it upon herself to visit Bertha in any odd gap in her day to put the drops in her eyes. When Rita moved to another hospital there was no-one in that church willing to take over the task. But I mustn't be judgemental for if I had been around I'm not all that sure I would have been too eager to take over myself. On Judgement Day I doubt I shall be asked whether I visited the cinema or not, but I may be asked whether I visited Bertha.

But let me return to where I began.

One of the most controversial acts of the Israeli government is the building of the West Bank barrier. When completed it will be 430 miles long – greater than the distance between Land's

End and the Scottish border - and it will exclude not only terrorists but thousands of law-abiding Arabs. The land of the Jews and the Samaritans is more divided than ever. But we Christians must not be complacent. Few organisations have been as enthusiastic in building walls as the Church, we have proved adept at excluding others from God's grace. God has not called us to be wall builders, but wall demolishers, holy vandals and every act of neighbourly charity knocks another hole in those ancient walls