

Luke 10:25-37. Trinity 7. July 18th

It was Sunday lunchtime and I was wearing, as always in the parish, my working clothes – black trousers, black shirt and clerical collar. I answered a knock at the door and a middle-aged man stood before me holding a handful of leaflets, his first and only words were, *I've come to talk to you about God*. I was a little abrupt, *I've been talking about God all morning, I've talked about him enough for today*, I snapped, and shut the door. I was angry; not because he was a Jehovah's Witness nor that he had disturbed my lunch, but because he simply hadn't seen me. It was as though an invisible man had opened the door to him. I think if the bishop in his miter and cope had answered the door, he would not have seen him either. If I had been stark naked he wouldn't have batted an eyelid. For all intents and purposes I, a human being, who happened to be a clergyman, did not exist.

On the other hand Ruth, a neighbour, was a sophisticated, intelligent, charming, vivacious and sensitive lady who also happened to be Jewish, which may help to explain her reaction when I bumped into her one morning just after I'd been ordained. For the first time she saw me in clerical dress and she became a different woman to the one I knew as a neighbour and friend, she trembled violently, could hardly look at me and found it difficult to speak to me. She managed to explain her startling reaction by stammering out that clergy, I presume she meant Christian clergy, terrified her. All she could see was my black shirt and clerical collar. I never did find out the cause of her fear, but it was real and went very deep.

So I may fail to see people, *really* see them, because, like the Jehovah's Witness, I am so immersed in my own concerns that I am incapable of paying attention to others, even if they are standing before me and they are those to whom I wish to deliver an important message. Or, I may fail to see them because some external distraction - their dress, their accent, their colour, whatever - arouses in me fears and prejudices which can be as irrational as my fear of the bogeyman when I was a little child.

This line of thought has been provoked by a remark Ali made in a sermon last month. It was about the woman who interrupted the meal at which Jesus was the guest of a Pharisee and began to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. *Do you see this woman?* Jesus asked his scandalised host. Ali suggested that what he really meant was, *Do you really see her? Do you see beyond her outward appearance, her bad reputation, her extravagant behaviour? Do you see the, passionate, vulnerable, devoted woman that she really is?*

Three times this word *see*, or its equivalent, occurs in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A priest *saw* the beaten-up, half-dead victim of thieves and passed by on the other side; a Levite *saw* him and did the same, a Samaritan *saw* him and moved with compassion bent over him, ministered to him, poured wine and oil into his wounds, which, by the way, were substances used in holy rituals by priests and Levites, took care of him and ensured his future welfare. He was the only one of the three who saw, *really* saw, a human being in desperate need, possibly of a different race and religion and dress to himself.

The reason often given for the behaviour of the priest and Levite is that the man appeared to be half-dead, it was ritually forbidden to touch a dead body, they would be contaminated if they did do, so they took no chances. It could also be that they were in a hurry, they may have had urgent business in the Temple at Jerusalem and this was their first priority. They were astute enough to realise that it was not going to be enough to simply pat him on the back, wish him well and then go on their way. This was going to take time and possibly money. Or it may be that they were repelled by the sight of a beaten-up, blood-stained, dust-covered, half-dead man in torn clothing. They may even have thought he was blind drunk and been afraid of getting their fine clothes soiled by blood and vomit. There could have been many explanations for their careful avoidance, but the main reason, I suspect, was that they simply could not see him. And there have no doubt been many occasions in my own life when I have failed to see, really see, someone in dire need or made a snap judgment of someone because something in their appearance or behaviour put me off them.

There is Mary, not her real name. Everything about Mary when I first met her made me feel uncomfortable; she comes from an aristocratic Scottish family, her grandfather's godmother was Queen Victoria – and it shows. She has an authoritative, superior and self-confident air that immediately made me nervous and defensive, she speaks with the sort of clipped accent that only the best finishing schools can achieve, she was unnerving - and she was my churchwarden. My initial thought was, *I'm in for a rough ride*

here. I could not have been more mistaken. It took time, but as I came to know her I discovered that this formidable lady is pure gold and she has become a close and valued friend. She said to me recently, *My new Vicar doesn't like me, he won't speak to me. I don't wonder,* I replied, *you probably scare him to death like you did me.* Among other things that changed my attitude was the discovery that she was a volunteer at a hospice and in order to be more useful she had trained as a masseur. I once asked her if she ever came across AIDS sufferers, *Yes,* she said. *How do they cope?* I asked. *They are the bravest of them all,* she said. At a time when most people would shrink from them, be afraid to brush against them in the street, she laid gentle hands on their broken bodies and eased their pain assuring them they were still valued human beings and still loved. Mary suffers from a spinal defect and has a limp, she knows what pain is, which may explain her compassion for the suffering.

For two or three years I was a volunteer at a drop-in counseling service, during that time I encountered many uncomely looking people, their faces distorted by sadness, anger, despair, hatred. Yet something very strange happened when, in some instances, I spent hours and hours over weeks, months and once with one young man two years. They all became beautiful, not necessarily because their problems were solved, but because I was seeing them in a different light and the lines of pain etched on their faces became the chief contributors to their beauty.

I could go on, I could keep you here for hours telling you of the regrets I have for so often misjudging people, or the thankfulness I feel for the times I have actually seen beyond the outward mask to the beautiful person underneath. But I've said enough to make my point.

One thought that has been constantly with me during the preparation of this sermon is that I could go home after this service, book a flight to Israel and be standing during the next day or so on the road that leads from Jericho to Jerusalem, watching the travelers, probably in their cars, passing up and down. Except that I don't need to go to all that trouble, I am already, just as you are, on that road, and everyone on that road is a wounded person. Some like the man who fell among thieves are clearly, openly wounded; others, maybe like the priest and the Levite, hide their wounds, some so deeply that they don't even know themselves that they are wounded. And the most wounded of all in this parable is the Good Samaritan, if you look closely at the hands pouring out the oil and the wine you will see the nailprints in them. It is by those wounds that we are healed and that we in our turn may become wounded healers.