

The parable of the Good Samaritan – a favourite for many of us.

It is, in fact one of the better known bible stories that has passed into folklore and for many is simply taken in a general moral sense, that if you see someone in a ditch you go and help them.

Sometimes this understanding may be expanded into a moral lesson about the wrong of racial and religious prejudice when the intolerance between Samaritans and the Jews is considered.

But, as theologian Tom Wright suggests, if we are to have any chance of understanding what Jesus himself meant by the parable – we have to go deeper than these folklore issues.¹

So let's do that now and have a closer look at the parable.

Jesus is teaching his disciples about the nature of mission when he is questioned by a lawyer: *What should I do to inherit eternal life.* And, as was his way, Jesus responded to the question with a question: *What does the law say about this.*

The lawyer quotes the law: *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.* The lawyer then takes the issue further – *yes well who is my neighbour* – in other words - where does that obligation stop? And it is then that Jesus tells the parable.

In essence what the parable does in reply to the lawyer's question is to refuse to offer any simple criteria for generalising about where the action of love stops.

In the parable Jesus very cleverly leads his listener to focus on two main issues.

The first is about – what may get in the way of our loving mercy towards another - that is, what may give us an excuse for avoiding it.

For example, the priest and the Levite in the parable - both of them religious leaders - had sound reasons for avoiding the man on the side of the road. According to the purity law in Leviticus they were forbidden to touch the man, for if he was in fact dead then they would incur the ceremonial defilement that the Law forbids.

Through the Law, both the priest and Levite had very good reasons why they crossed to the other side of the road and did not help the man. They could well justify their actions.

This part of the parable challenges us to be honest about the excuses we can make that will allow us to avoid exercising a loving merciful response to someone in need - and to work through them, so that we can be true to the nature of our mission in Christ.

The second issue in the parable is about our need to think about from whom we expect to receive loving mercy.

A Samaritan, in the culture of Jesus day, would have been seen as the most unlikely source of loving mercy. The hostility and hatred between Jews and the Samaritans had gone on for hundreds of years - even to suggest that the Samaritan was the one who offered merciful love towards the victim would have been very offensive.

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, London: 2004. P127.

Jesus audience would have been expecting to hear that one of their own had been the hero who saved the day and taken care of the needy one. But the parable reveals the unexpected. It is the detested one, the Samaritan who saves the needy one.

This part of the parable challenges us to think outside the box and recognise that we can be repeatedly surprised and humbled by learning what love looks like from profoundly unlikely sources. And to acknowledge and accept that we are likely to have to depend in important ways on the supposed alien in our lives.

I'm sure many of us can recall different events in our lives when we have experienced help from people who we least expected to help us in our time of need.

And perhaps this is what happened in the town of Gander on the north eastern Canadian island of Newfoundland that I read about last weekend in the Australian newspaper (July 6-7 Review).

Gander is a remote town that had been built around a British air base at the start of world war two. In the present day however it is not a destination frequented by many Canadians let alone world travellers. That is, until September 11, 2001 (more commonly known as 9-11) when 38 commercial planes carrying about 6600 passengers (equal to about two thirds of Gander's population,) were forced to land at the airport for more than five days when the United States closed its airspace.

What happened to all the passengers - who were, no doubt, from many different countries and faith traditions - at this historic time - was, they were welcomed by the local community who came together in force to house, feed and otherwise support them in their own homes. The people of Gander responded to the consequences of a great tragedy with kindness, generosity, mercy and love towards 6600 anxious passengers - and those who responded in this way, let nothing stand in their way.

The newspaper article noted that Gander is so remote that there is a sense of isolation there yet the locals are very proud of where they come from and at the same time honest and humble about the challenges of living there.

They respond to their life experience with this joyous culture and music that makes you want to dance with this sense that we're all in this together – that if your neighbour has nothing you will give them half your food, and if a stranger comes to your door, you welcome them because it could be you next time. That is just how they live.

Wonderful Interpersonal connections were made during this time in Gander and are still celebrated with regular reunions.

Jesus final words to the lawyer in the parable are "Go and do likewise". These words speak loudly to us all.

Doing likewise - is to show merciful love to someone we know is in need, letting go of justifiable excuses that stop us from our mission in Christ.

Doing likewise - is to show that we are ready to recognise and imitate the reactions of people we may normally ignore or despise.

I believe these are the challenges of the parable, which serve a deep purpose of searching our personal inner truths and the responses we make to our neighbour.

The Lord be with you.