The Good Samaritan

On one occasion, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher", he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"*What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*

He answered: " '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, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

"*You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the inn-keeper. 'Look after him', he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"*Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Luke 10:25-37 NET

§1 Allegories.

Our tale, the Good Samaritan, is layered with significance. The external skin is a conversation between Jesus and an expert of the law about how to inherit eternal life, and how to interpret the Jewish Law. Beneath that is what we normally think of as the parable itself: a tale about a road, a crime, and some bystanders. And at the sweet core of that story are two men.

Early theologians and church fathers understood the tale of the Good Samaritan allegorically. You and I are the man on the road; "going down", falling, from the paradise of Jerusalem to the ruin of Jericho. We are robbed, beaten, stripped, and left for dead by the hostile powers of the world, and by our own sin. The priest and the Levite are the Law and the prophets, each ultimately powerless to aid us in our sorry state. The Samaritan is Jesus, who can bandage our wounds and transport us to the safety of an inn – the church. Jesus has enabled the church to care for those in need until he comes again. The story-teller's command – Go and do likewise – is therefore a call to us all to join the church, to emulate Christ the Samaritan in caring for the beaten, wounded, and naked.

A different allegorical perspective is made possible when we look not only at the parable itself, and not only to the context of conversation between Jesus and the expert, but to the peripheral layers of the context of presentation in Luke – the only gospel in which this story appears. In the chapter before our tale, Luke reports that Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (9:51). The preceding mention of Jesus' location says that he is in Bethsaida, far north of both Jerusalem and Jericho. His journey south takes him through Samaria (9:52).

Luke does not tell us where Jesus is when he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, but the subsequent story in the gospel takes place at the home of Mary and Martha, which is in Bethany, according to the gospel of John (11:1). The town of Bethany lies on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, so it seems that when Jesus tells our tale, he is either on or approaching the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, having come from the land of the Samaritans. He is travelling the road in the story, but in the opposite direction to the man who is beaten and robbed.

Now, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious for criminality. We can imagine the priest and the Levite in the parable walking hurriedly, alert to possible dangers around them. When they come upon a man lying, perhaps dead, by the side of the road, they deliberate over whether to help, or whether even to investigate. However, not only would interaction with this man potentially compromise their ceremonial “cleanliness”, but it occurs to them that perhaps he is a prop in the plot of a group of bandits, waiting to sabotage anyone who stops and stoops to help. Of course, the priest and Levite know the command – Love your neighbour –, but here they decide that the man on the side of the road does not count as a neighbour, and the decision is quickly made to pass by on the other side.

Just as the man lying by the side of the road is approached by two upstanding members of Jewish society who are deliberating over who counts as their neighbour; so Jesus, travelling along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, is approached by an expert in the Law whose question is – who is my neighbour? And just as the man by the side of the road has been beaten, stripped, and left only half-alive; so will Jesus' journey end in Jerusalem. Thus Jesus is the man beaten and left for dead on the road.

If this allegorical perspective is extended, perhaps the Samaritan is Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a

member of the Sanhedrin, a religious and political power in Jerusalem, and one of the courts in front of which Jesus was tried before death. He was from the town of Arimathea, which lay in the hills on the border between Judea and Samaria. Although he cannot have been a Samaritan outwardly, (since Jews hated Samaritans, but Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin), he may have come from a Samaritan home. Moreover, Joseph was a rich man who was a secret disciple of Jesus, and who claimed Jesus body from Pilate after the crucifixion, burying him in a tomb on his own land. — (If some of the upcoming suggestions about the interpretation of the parable are right; perhaps Joseph is even the expert taking to Jesus now!)

But if the man lying beaten on the road is Jesus, then regardless of any allegorical identification of the Samaritan, the story-teller's famous command – Go and do likewise – is a call to us to copy the Samaritan of the story in loving Jesus, even the beaten, naked, and dying Christ of the cross, so clearly alluded to in the figure of the beaten man in the above painting of our parable, by Aimé Morot.

So here are two possible perspectives on the parable:

- The Samaritan is Jesus, and we, or the expert in the Law, are the beaten man.
- The beaten man is Jesus, and we, or the expert in the Law, are the Samaritan.

The question now is not: which allegorical perspective is right? but: what does the tale mean in light of its own capability of being read in both these ways? — this tale which, let's notice, already asks to be read in light of a movement between two: the beaten man and the Samaritan; the priest and the Levite; the oil and the wine; the two silver coins; the expert and Jesus; heart and soul, strength and mind; love of God and love of neighbour, your neighbour as yourself.

§2 Who Is My Neighbour?

We should not overlook the exact context in which the parable appears. An expert in the Law stands up to test Jesus – What must I do to inherit eternal life?

The expert has come to test Jesus, but in what sense? Is he testing him to see if he is worthy of being followed, (if Jesus answers “correctly”)? Or is he testing him to see if he is worthy of defamation, (if he answers “incorrectly”)? Jesus does not respond directly to the question – what must I do? – but his answer evades the expert's terms. He answers the question with another question, asking – How do you read the Law?. The expert gives a reply that was more or less standard at the time – the law is summed up in this: love God and love your neighbour. Jesus concurs.

But the expert seeks to “justify himself”, and so he asks – Who is my neighbour? What is the tone of the expert's question, and what is his intention? In what sense does the expert wish to “justify himself”?

- Does he want to ask for Jesus' interpretation because he trusts Jesus, and wants to check whether his own understanding, and so his own conduct, are in line with the truth; and so does he in this sense want to “justify himself”?
- Or does he rather wish to elaborate on why he asked a question which has such a standard, orthodox reply, and so “justify” his own questioning of Jesus to Jesus?
- Or perhaps, since Jesus of Nazareth is obviously no typical Rabbi – he supposedly does

> extraordinary miracles, and even socializes with tax collectors and prostitutes –, perhaps the expert wishes to "justify" his *own* theology to everyone witnessing the conversation by teasing out some heterodoxy in Jesus' claims; for orthodox understandings of the command – Love thy neighbour – would draw some boundary around the concept of a "neighbour", such that prostitutes and tax collectors might be excluded. The opposite of a "neighbour" is an "enemy", whom one should "hate" (Matthew 5:43). How will Jesus draw the distinction?

Whichever angle the expert is coming from, Jesus is faced with the expert's question – who is my neighbour? He responds with our tale. So let's understand the parable of the Good Samaritan as a direct response to the expert's question, designed to poetically elucidate for us who the expert's neighbour is. In this case, the question that Jesus finally asks the expert in light of the story – which man was a neighbour to the man by the side of the road? – is also the question – which man is your neighbour? The expert responds – "the one who had mercy on him". The Samaritans were such fierce enemies of the Jews, so thoroughly hated, that the expert cannot even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan" – the only identifying mark given to the hero of the parable by its teller. So Jesus' question is challenging the expert to recognize the Samaritan not only as the beaten man's neighbour, but as his own. And this first non-allegorical element of our parable's meaning has been its most impactful and infamous, and is a lasting challenge to us, never to be forgotten: to welcome even your enemy as your neighbour, and therefore the Law – love your neighbour – means also – love your enemy as yourself.

So much for the Samaritan, but what about the man lying beaten on the road? If Jesus' question – which man was a neighbour to the man by the side of the road? – is also the question – which man is your neighbour? – then the expert is put into the shoes, or rather into the naked body of the beaten man, since the Samaritan is his neighbour. The expert wanted to discuss what exactly it would mean for him to love his neighbour, but Jesus' parable is saying that what is also at stake is the expert's need to be the recipient of the love of a neighbour. Now, let us add in the allegorical perspectives of §1 above: if the Samaritan is Jesus, then the parable communicates to us that the expert is in need of love and mercy from his neighbour, the man next to whom he literally stands there and then, the Christ. If you and I are the man on the road, then this is what the Law says, this is how I read it, this is what one must do to inherit eternal life: receive the love of your neighbour Jesus.

The expert identifies the Samaritan as the beaten man's neighbour because of the Samaritan's "mercy". Whilst an orthodox understanding of the Law might define "neighbour" in geographical, national, racial, or religious terms; the expert is now challenged by his own response to Jesus' question to recognize "neighbourliness" as defined solely by mercy. So neighbourliness can be best identified by those is *need* of mercy. Jesus is parabolically saying that identifying, and thus loving, one's neighbour, and so following God's command, requires, or is at least facilitated by being in, a situation of needing mercy – a situation of depravity, nakedness, and death. If we are, along with the expert, the beaten man; then not only do we stand, or lie, in need of mercy, but we are enabled to follow God's law by being in that need.

Finally, let's bring in the second allegorical perspective: if the beaten man is Jesus, and if the sole condition for neighbourliness is mercy, then we are challenged to recognize our neighbours to be anyone who has loving mercy on Christ. Who is my neighbour? My brother, my sister. Who is my brother, my sister? Who shows mercy – who, with heart, soul, strength, and mind, loves Jesus. And are we ready to find our sisters and brothers amongst those whom we had counted as our enemies? But there are those in our midst, who we had taken to be brothers and sisters, who aren't even our

neighbours. These are the priest and the Levite in the story. The expert admits that they were not neighbours to the man who fell into the hands of robbers. If the parable addressed the question – who is my neighbour? – because the meaning of the Law – Love your neighbour – was at stake, then the expert himself concludes that he is not to love the priest or the Levite, that these, who did not show mercy, are his enemies.

Immediately preceding the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke, Jesus has said that for those Jewish towns which did not welcome the people of God, it will be less bearable on the day of judgement that it will be for Sodom (10:12). The people who do not recognize their brothers and sisters will be "thrown down to Hades" (10:15). And yet, if these towns, these people, are our enemies, and we "call down fire" on them, the beaten man, the Good Samaritan rebukes us (9:54-55), for we are to love our enemies, even as ourselves.

§3 Go And Do Likewise.

These previous interpretations are premised on understanding our parable to be a direct, if poetic, response to the expert's question – who is my neighbour? But we should consider how Jesus continues on from the expert's identification of the Samaritan as the beaten man's neighbour. Jesus does not say – you have correctly identified your neighbour, now love him. Instead, Jesus says – Go and do likewise. Thus Jesus again evades the terms of the expert's question. Where the expert wanted to know who his neighbour was, Jesus instead challenges him to emulate the one that he has identified as an exemplar of neighbourliness. Jesus responds to the question – who is my neighbour? – with – *be* a neighbour. Is Jesus just changing topic, even if subtly? Or is Jesus responding aptly and crucially to the expert's question? The expert wants to know the conditions for recognizing another as his neighbour, and Jesus is saying that this accomplishment requires *being* a neighbour.

If the expert needs to hear this injunction – be a neighbour – it is because he is not yet being a neighbour to anyone; and if, as Jesus is suggesting, having a neighbour requires being a neighbour, then this expert has no neighbours. The expert sees that the priest and the Levite of the parable were not neighbours to the beaten man, and so did not make the beaten man their neighbour. Similarly, the expert is making no one his neighbour. If Jesus had given a more straight-forward response to the question – who is my neighbour? – it might therefore have been – no one!

In contrast, the Samaritan exhibits the qualities of a neighbour by going out of his way to help a man who has been the victim of cruel treatment. We are to go and do likewise. The victim is not characterized in any way; neither his race, nor profession, nor social standing are described by Jesus, so they are not conditions for the Samaritan's mercy, which comes freely. To be a neighbour is to identify a victim, and act mercifully. In saying – Go and do likewise – Jesus is therefore challenging the expert to identify victims in his own vicinity – whether they were subject of his own cruel treatment, or whether they lie by the side of the road – and to act mercifully. Let's incorporate the thoughts of the previous section: If the expert is identifying the Samaritan as his own neighbour, he is thus simultaneously identifying him as a victim. Whether this expert has personally victimized Samaritans, or whether Samaritans instead lie by the side of the road of Jewish brutality, Jesus challenges him to have mercy on them.

The Law under discussion is – Love your neighbour – so a “neighbour” is someone worthy of love in

God's eyes. Jesus is implying that recognizing a neighbour requires being a neighbour; and so to recognize someone as worthy of God's love requires acting mercifully, lovingly. And so the identification of the neighbour as such cannot be settled prior to, or in spite of, the action of love. Jesus is thus challenging the expert to act mercifully toward Samaritans prior to satisfying himself of their status as a "neighbour". It is as if Jesus is saying – Love, in spite of the Law; Love those about whom the Law has not yet decided, those on the outside, and at the periphery of accepted standards of love. And so are we right to say that being a neighbour requires identifying victims? For the beaten man's status as a victim is questionable – perhaps he is being used as bait by other highway bandits; or perhaps he is already dead. If neighbourliness is a matter of identifying victims, then we could ask, in the manner of the expert – who is my victim? But does not this parable say in reply – *be* a victim –? Who is my neighbour? – Be a neighbour. – Who is my brother, my sister? – Be a brother, a sister.

Be a victim: This reinforces the intimation that we already heard from this parable that identifying one's neighbour requires, or is at least made more possible in, a situation of needing mercy – a situation of depravity, nakedness, and death. And as the Samaritan places himself in this position as he stops and stoops; so Jesus, this lover of the wretched of the earth, elicited through his ministry his own victimization and, ultimately, his execution by his brothers and sisters. To love your neighbour is therefore to be ready to die, to take up your cross (Matthew 16:24). Jesus' command to the expert – Go and do likewise – is a call to emulate his own victim, the Samaritan, Jesus; it is a call to us to follow him who died for our sins.

§4 Love God And Love Your Neighbour.

But will the expert hear this call to have mercy on a victim? Or will he and his larger community victimize the man who neighbours him, who stands next to him there and then, Jesus, the Son of God? If they shall, then this takes us to a layer of the parable that we have not yet considered, the fact that the expert sums up the Law with both – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind – and – Love your neighbour as yourself.

The whole parable is a movement between two: Jesus and the Law; the Samaritan and the victim; and, ultimately, God and neighbour.

For the man lying beaten and naked by the side of the road in the parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus himself, God and neighbour, God and brother, God and victim. The Samaritan took pity on the beaten man in his heart; he took action, approaching the naked man, despite the possibility of attack; he used his strength to raise the beaten man up onto his donkey, and to take him to an inn; he carefully planned with the inn-keeper to have the man cared for until his return. The Samaritan loved the beaten man with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Therefore, the parable of the Good Samaritan is not just a response to the expert's questions about who a neighbour is, but it is a larger response from Jesus to the expert's entire understanding of the Law. Jesus' tale portrays a Samaritan obeying both commands – Love God, and love your neighbour – in one and the same set of actions, thus demonstrating the identity of these commands; the identity of God and neighbour in the identification of the Samaritan with the victim. Not only is God made incarnate in Jesus, a man who "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him", a man who "was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with

suffering” (Isaiah 53:2-3); but God is incarnate in every hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick, and imprisoned victim; insofar as what we do to, with, and for the least of these, we do to, with, and for God (Matthew 25:40). To love God is to love your neighbour.