

Love moved into the neighbourhood....



De Barmhartige Samaritaan, Jan Frearks van Der Bij

The Samaritans. Who are they?

Back in first century Israel, they were seen as neighbours from hell, as intruders, land stealers, enemies.

Two weeks ago, we read of when Jesus stopped at a Samaritan village on the way to Jerusalem. They rejected him – from fear, and prejudice - and, if you remember, the disciples wanted to call down fire upon them. You can almost hear them saying *what did you expect, going to a Samaritan village, that's what they do... that's what they're like.... Now.. let's just burn down their village...* But Jesus rebuked the disciples in the same way he does demons and storms – all sorts of spiralling, uncontrolled violence.

When we get caught up in generalisations, or prejudice, or spirals of drama and judgement... Jesus rebukes us. He asks us to keep a focus on him, and on a love that gives itself to all.... And tell a different story to the world.

So, after they've been kicked out the village, and set off on their way again, what is the first thing that Jesus does? – he tells them a story. This story. About the Good Samaritan. Chapter nine, kicked out; Chapter ten, Good Samaritan. A story about how to give life, rather than rain down death.

It's an odd question, the question the lawyer asks of Jesus that starts that story off – *what should I do to inherit eternal life?* As if there is some transaction by which we can achieve eternal life – or earn it – I do this, I receive that.

And perhaps that's why Jesus answers him not just by asking *what does the law say*, but also what *do you read there?* It's a more ongoing sense of *what is your heart interpreting here?*

The lawyer responds with the text from the daily prayer of the Jews about showing love for God, and part of Leviticus about showing love for our neighbour.

If we love God with all our heart – we learn to see with his love.

And we come to see that we don't have to earn eternal life, it is a gift given to us. All we have to do is unwrap it, and wear it, be part of it.

All we have to do is let God's eternal love.... 'love' through us.

We see all God's children with the light of his love and his face in every human face. All made in his image. No exceptions. Not even the Samaritans. Not even those we find difficult, or we have been brought up to have prejudices against. Not even those who reject us, don't understand us, or are afraid of us. Not even ourselves.

But the lawyer asks ... *who is my neighbour?* You can almost feel that deep heart-sigh from Jesus. He's just had the disciples wanting to rain fire on their neighbours in a Samaritan village, and now this! And he tells this story... to the lawyer? To the disciples? To us?

A story about... a Samaritan... who crosses all the boundaries for love. The Levite and the priest – holy men - passed by the injured man in the story, for fear of touching, and being defiled – for fear of shame.

But Jesus holds before us the Samaritan getting right in there, bandaging the injured man's wounds and anointing them, delaying his whole journey by a night to care for him.

Which of these three was the neighbour? asks Jesus, turning the original question neatly on its head.

Not 'who is my neighbour' but 'who can you be a neighbour to....'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – the German priest who stood up in his Christian Faith against the Nazi regime, eventually being martyred for his faith – Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in one of his books....

Who is my neighbour?

"**You** are the neighbour". "Neighbourliness is not a quality in other people¹".

Who is my neighbour? The answer to that lies within you, says Jesus. In the love in your heart. Love, says Jesus, is the opposite of fear. Let go of fear and worry, and don't let boundaries and shame stand in the way. Love is what will change the world. Love is eternal life. Love is God breaking through into our hearts.

Do this, says Jesus, and you will live. You will come alive into who you are meant to be. Eternal Life is not just about a future reward – it's about NOW. It starts with your own heart. Don't worry about how you earn eternal life; just step into the love that pours itself out around us, giving and receiving, part of God's love in the world.

By the end of the story, the lawyer grudgingly admits that "the one who showed mercy" was the good neighbour. Notice even now he can't bring himself to say the word *Samaritan*.

¹ The cost of discipleship

Sometimes our prejudices, our fears, our shames, our inbuilt conceptions are deeply, deeply ingrained. But a journey has been begun. A heart has started to reflect, a story to change.

Jesus calls us to tell a different story to the world...

So the Samaritans, who are they?

Well, one autumn afternoon, a young curate, Fr. Chad, was leading a funeral service for a young girl.

She'd committed suicide. She was 14 years old. She had started to menstruate, that was all. But she didn't have a clue what was happening and thought there was something horrifically wrong, – thought it was a kind of STD, and was too ashamed and afraid to tell anyone.

So she took her life.

Chad Varah's heart was torn up with pain and grief for this young woman. He later returned to the grave and prayed, "little girl, I didn't know you, but you have changed my life".

In 1953, Chad Varah set up a telephone service in his London Church, with an easy to remember number. He put out an advert that said ... anyone who feels scared, or ashamed, no matter why, call this number, and I will listen. I can't promise to fix it or sort it out, but I will listen, with no judgement, only love.

Chad Varah soon got overwhelmed by the number of calls he was receiving, but God sent him co-workers. He called his team of volunteers

'The Samaritans'.

We sometimes wonder what the impact of Jesus, of Christianity might be... well, here's one. That word, *Samaritan*, has gone from being a descriptor of an enemy, to an example of love and kindness. Jesus has turned the tables on the concept of who's in and who's out, of what is, and is not, acceptable. On what – or who – we do, or do not, need to be afraid of.



In the Message translation of the Bible, when describing the incarnation, Eugene Peterson described that self-giving act of Love that brought us all into the family of God in these words... *The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.* God made everyone his neighbour that day, and his family. And as his family we share that neighbourhood.

Out of the pain and vulnerability of the man in the Good Samaritan story, came an unlikely ability to accept help from someone he would not normally have shaken hands with. Out of that poor young woman's death came a charitable movement of love that has reached out to many, and saved many broken hearts and lives in the years that have passed since.

My neighbour is the one to whom I show love – in giving and receiving, in sharing our gifts and our vulnerabilities. My neighbour is the one with whom I break down boundaries of fear and shame in God's Name of Love.

So let us love, wildly, freely.
Go and do likewise, says Jesus.... Knock down the limits on love....

Just... move into the neighbourhood. And love there.