

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

I'm grateful that I've never been attacked in the street. But I have had an incident where I found myself on the pavement without notice. (It was caused by a medicine which didn't really agree with me). I was walking the dog, a friendly beast. I'd been talking to a group of people I'd passed on our walk. I tripped on a slab barely raised above the level. I should have just stumbled a little, but no, down I went. I remember one of the strangers asking what had happened. The next thing I remember is the ambulance arriving.

After a brief assessment, they loaded me and the dog into the ambulance and removed us round the corner and delivered me back to my wife. They checked me over prior to their going back to base. I, and my wife were so grateful to these strangers phoning for help, and yet more strangers trained in sorting things out for us.

In the days of Jesus, I suspect the streets weren't always as safe as might be, and certainly on the open roads there were bandits and thieves who would stop at nothing to steal what others were carrying. So when Jesus was challenged by a religious lawyer about eternal life, Jesus was ready to teach. The question was thrown back at the man by Jesus, What does the law say? And the man confidently recited the well known formula to be found in the scriptures. Affirmed in his reply, he was led to ask a supplementary question about the word 'neighbour', asking 'Who is my neighbour?'

So the story we heard was told; a simple story set on a certain road the man would have known, as would anyone else who was listening.

It was one of those times when Jesus chose extremes of personalities to star in it. (Something Jesus would readily do!). The Samaritan who was from a group of people looked down upon by the Jews, and a priest and a levite who knew the laws and often tested Jesus about his teaching and behaviour.

The man who was attacked, beaten and robbed was presumably a Jew. He was left almost for dead. As he lay there in the sun and heat, bleeding, potential help came near, but the man walked past. He was a priest. Later another man came by and he was a levite, a man of the same clan. Both these men were on their own journeys. We don't know which way they travelled, but they were either going to be purified before worship, or returning from worship cleansed.

Lastly the Samaritan arrives on the scene. He doesn't stop to see if he is purified or not. He sees a man in trouble. He doesn't think of himself but takes oil and

wine from his pack and gives first aid. He lifts the man onto his donkey and proceeds to the nearest inn. There he arranges accommodation for the man, paying the bill in advance and saying he'll pay any excess if necessary when he passes by again.

Here are issues of selflessness, of trust and being trusted. Here characters are drawn, which go to the heart of what love and faith are. I won't criticise the priest and levite. But I can acclaim the actions of the Samaritan. He was disliked by the Jews yet he thought of the man, as a man, and not from a different nation or class. He put himself out, and at risk, by his actions. But it's obvious to me that he was well known at the inn as a regular customer. His word was enough, although he was putting himself in a position where the innkeeper could abuse the trust. We don't hear any more of the story. That's a shame.

But the story does act as a challenge. How do we react to those who are vulnerable through no fault of their own? How are we known by the people we come into contact with on a daily basis, or with strangers? Are we trusted to be honest and reliable? Are our actions calculated, or spontaneous? Do we put our religion before the expression of our faith?

I remember very early on in my ministry, a lady who apologised for not attending church on the previous Sunday. She had been pricking out tomato plants, or the like in her neighbour's greenhouse because the neighbour wasn't able to do it herself for some reason. My reply was simple. She was worshipping. Her worship was in the works of her hands on that occasion.

The epistle of James (ch2) in the New Testament, talks about faith and works. Faith without action isn't the way to salvation.. We express our faith by what we do. It's right to worship together in church. As our preacher said last week, it will be good to be back together to sing, read, pray and ponder. But this story of Jesus tells us to go further and, without weighing up the consequences we must be spontaneous in our offering of love and support to those who need help, even if that means we have to get someone else to do what we can't. Like the people who called the ambulance for when I ended up on the pavement.

Jesus's words to the lawyer who agreed that it was the Samaritan who was the injured man's neighbour, was told to go and do the same. So it is for us. We must be that 'Good Samaritan' as we see the need.