

# Who Is My Neighbour? - 3rd October 2021

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[ 0 : 00 ] Kicking off then, one of the best ways, perhaps, to challenge preconceived ideas is to offer people a different perspective from which to see things in life.

So, if we take, for example, a map of the world, we're used to seeing this classic view one of the most recognisable things we can see. It stems from about the 1500s, this kind of map was put together, when Europe dominated the world, so Europe slapped bang in the middle.

And yet, just as perhaps saying something like the Ryder Cup, Europe can't always have its way, so other maps are available. For instance, this one, where the USA takes centre stage, is at the heart of how the world might be seen.

A different perspective on how we're used to seeing the world. Then again, another perspective might be this one, which is more of a specific focus of a map of the world, where the UK, we're tucked right up in the top left-hand corner, almost unrecognisable for us.

Still, other perspectives of the world are available. Here's an upside-down map of the world, where Africa and South America take centre stage. And then, because it's hard to accurately plot our globe on a flat map, this one's interesting.

[ 1 : 18 ] Here's a map of how each country actually is, in terms of its size, not the way that a map actually shows it. So, the light blue is how it's seen on a normal map.

The dark blue is actually the size of each particular country. As you can see, though, it's the northern hemisphere, which is usually over-exaggerated in our maps, which means the southern hemisphere is actually far more dominant in size than perhaps we realise.

I guess who knows what world history would have looked like if the dark blue kind of map had been the one that we'd had for the last few hundred years. But all these different maps, different ways to look at things, they go to show, I think, that our perceptions of the world around us can be challenged simply by changing our perspective or our vantage point or how we see things.

And I'd say the same principle is true when we look at the Bible, as we're going to do this morning, and that the same story in the Bible can be perceived in very different ways depending on who's reading it or which character's eyes we see that story through.

So last week, Ruth highlighted the way in which her female rabbi friend opened her eyes to a new way of reading the story of Abraham and Isaac, whereas we would normally see things from Abraham's perspective.

[ 2 : 42 ] She said the story has a very different feel when we put ourselves in Isaac's sandals instead. If you weren't here or you haven't caught up on YouTube, please do so, because she's raising some interesting and challenging ideas in that talk.

So thank you for that last week, Ruth. But today we're going to continue that kind of idea of reading the Bible from different perspectives, because I'd like us to see if this approach might shed new light on what may well be a very familiar story to us.

It's the story, the parable that Jesus told. We know it as the Good Samaritan. It's a story found in Luke's Gospel, chapter 10. Here's a clip of it. 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 neighbor as yourself.

[ 3 : 53 ] 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 neighbor?

In reply, Jesus said, A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by 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 traveled, 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 own donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

[ 5 : 25 ] The next day, he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 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 neighbor 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. There we go now.

It's a story Jesus tells, which has four main characters. You've got this guy who's beaten up. You've got a priest and also a Levite, both of whom pass on by. And then this Samaritan guy who turns up to help.

Four characters, four vantage points, if you like, of the same story. So what we're going to do is see what we might learn by looking at things through each of their eyes.

[ 6 : 29 ] Of the four, though, let's start with the priest. This guy, and they were always men, sexist I know, but that's the way it was, who served at a temple in Jerusalem. There were loads of priests.

So they served on a rota basis. And the main job of a priest was to preserve the holiness of the temple in Jerusalem, the place where it was believed God's presence resided.

They therefore oversaw the worship which took place, the prayers, the singing, the sacrifices that were offered. And they read from and studied the scriptures, the law, in order to ensure they were keeping everyone in line with the rules of what was expected.

It was a pretty big deal to be a priest in this day and age. You were only allowed to be a priest if you were from a priestly family line. So your dad, your granddad and so on, they would have been priests.

So from the moment you were born, if you were a boy, your destiny was effectively decided you were going to be a priest. And so, crucially, because of their unique role, priests were expected to keep themselves as pure as possible, abiding by all sorts of rituals and regulations, so as not to be tainted, as they saw it, by the world around them.

[ 7 : 49 ] Now this priest in this Good Samaritan story, we're told he's walking down from Jerusalem to Jericho, no doubt on his way home from his priestly shift in the temple.

On his way though, he comes across this beaten, robbed, naked, probably dying man on the road.

We can imagine this priest is probably pretty wary when he sees this guy.

He'd have his pocket full of wages from his shift at the temple with him, and the road he's travelling was notorious for bandits and robbers. So to stop and help this guy would have been pretty risky for him.

And yet, aside from his own safety, the fact that he's a priest implies there were other things perhaps on his mind as well. Since we know that one of the rules of priesthood was that if you came into contact with a dead body, you would make yourself ritually unclean.

You'd then only have a matter of days to get back up to the temple in Jerusalem in order to be cleansed. Otherwise, you'd be kicked out of priesthood. You'd be unclean for the rest of your days in terms of being able to be a priest.

[ 9 : 03 ] And so for this guy, for this priest in the story, you can see the quandary perhaps he's in. Does he help and risk his livelihood, his status, his role? Or does he play it safe and avoid this guy at all costs?

Well, Jesus tells us, he says this priest decides not to help and to walk on by. He prioritises, if you like, the rules over compassion.

Adoption prioritises rituals over care. Which, if you think about it, is pretty messed up, really. See, I suspect Jesus included this priest guy in the story as a way of critiquing the religious and social system, which was getting it all wrong, where the rules clouded people's judgment to such a degree that people like this priest lost any sense of basic decency.

Instead, in Jesus, you know, he demonstrates something different. He was someone whose time and again we see in the Gospels broke these kinds of rules. He embraced the unclean, the sick, the lame.

He touched dead bodies before raising them to life. He forgave people without them needing to go and offer sacrifices in the temple. He valued women as disciples.

[10:22] He welcomed children. He healed on a Sabbath and so on. All ways in which he demonstrated that people, not practices, must be our priority.

And if we think about it, although the rules, I guess, that we're called to follow these days might be different, but there are times today, I'd say, when it's right for us to break the rules in order to put people first.

For example, we prayed for him earlier. I mentioned this the other week, but we've been breaking the law by allowing Tony to live in his caravan on our church car park for these past 18 months. Under the rules, we should have said no. But we agreed to put Tony up because he was a homeless guy who was just living in his car, got gifted a caravan, needed somewhere to put it, and we agreed to help.

I met with a couple of our local counsellors to tell them what we were doing. And because they're decent people, they've been turning a blind eye for the past 18 months, which I'm grateful for.

[11:27] Good news is, Phil and I, this week, were able to take the caravan to a new site for Tony to stay, hopefully longer term. He's happy there. We were happy to be able to move him on.

And even though we've been breaking the rules for these past 18 months, I'd do it again. It was the right thing for us to do. Well, how about this one? When we share in communion next, we've been battling this one around the PCC and with wardens and so on for a few months now.

But I think I've concluded that primarily for hygiene reasons, we're going to use individual cups to give out the wine when we have communion together. Now, technically, individual cups for communion are against Church of England law.

As for some debatable theological reasons, we're only meant to use a shared cup for wine. But given the choice between following the official rules, which involve drinking from a common cup or at best dipping a bit of bread into the wine, or following Jesus' command to do this in remembrance of me and work out for ourselves how to do that safely, I know which side I'd say we as a church should be on.

I'd rather follow Jesus' command than abide by the Church of England rules in this case. There are some of the lessons, perhaps, thinking about rules and regulations that we can maybe learn from the priest in this story.

[12:56] But similarly, though, a Levite comes along next. And he does the same as the priest, walking on by on the other side. Now, a Levite, in case you don't know, is a kind of junior priest, an assistant in the temple.

And who knows, perhaps as he's walking along, perhaps he'd noticed up ahead that the priest, you know, effectively his line manager in his job, had already decided to walk on by.

And so this Levite figured he'd better do the same. In some ways, it seems Jesus is emphasizing the same point by having both the priest and the Levite walk on by.

Because, well, I wonder, perhaps, if we'd do well to notice for ourselves the influence that our behavior can have on those who might look up to us in the same way that the Levite would look up to the priest.

You see, if the priest had stopped and attended to the man in the road, the Levite, when he turned up, would have seen the priest helping, would have mucked in, and he'd have learned a valuable lesson from this priest about how compassion is key.

[14:03] Instead, the Levite doesn't. He walks on by because he perhaps hasn't been modeled the best way to care. You know, I'm acutely aware, for me and Gemma's parents with our kids, that they're watching Gemma and I all the time for how we treat people, how we speak about people in their absence, how we choose to spend our time and our money and so on.

It's like having sort of mini-ofsted sometimes, then sort of picking you up on things. You know, it keeps us on our toes as parents, I'll tell you. But I guess the same applies for us as a church, you know, as our younger ones, our Sunday stars and so on.

You know, new folks who come and join us, our wider community. They'll all be taking it in and watching how we do things, seeing how caring, how compassionate we are in practice.

Does that walk back up our talk? I mentioned them earlier. I mean, it's been great over the past couple of weeks to start Little Friends Up, our baby and toddler group again. And the team have had some lovely, encouraging messages come through on Facebook from parents.

You know, their commitment as a team is much appreciated. Been in the sessions this week and it's hard work, as the team will know, especially with Lottie's absence this week.

[15:16] But it's worth it. It's worth it. The care and the kindness, they're contagious. You can see the sort of atmosphere building. It's a bit like the yeast, I suppose, of goodness, which works its way through the whole batch of bread, to paraphrase Jesus.

So as we were praying, I guess, earlier in the service, you know, I think let's be encouraged because every little act of kindness that we can offer makes a difference, whether at Little Friends or at work, in a queue for petrol, or when posting on Facebook.

You know, if the Levite had had a better mentor in the priest, he'd have stopped too. So just imagine the difference that your act of kindness and mine can make to those who are looking to us for a lead, for an example.

Now, in the story, the priest and the Levite, they're both passed by. But then Jesus surprises everyone listening by outlining a way in which a Samaritan turns up and stops to help this guy. It's a surprise because, as you may know, Samaritans in Jesus' time were a people group who were hated by most Jewish folks. It's basically rooted in racism, this hatred.

[16:37] Samaritans were reckoned to be descendants of Jewish people who intermarried with other nationalities many centuries before. So a Samaritan's perceived lack of Jewish purity made them pretty resented and despised by a lot of people.

And yet by installing this Samaritan guy as the hero in the story, Jesus confronts this racism head on.

The Samaritan does exactly what the priest had the opportunity and the means to do, but failed to do. So we're told Samaritan noticed the man, he took pity on him, he went to him, he bandaged and sanitized his wounds.

He put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. I mean, it's a catalogue of kindness. And the fact that we're told that the Samaritan was there to pay the bill, not just in advance, but he was there to pay the bill the next day, means that he cared for this guy through the night as well.

He stayed with him, going way beyond what might reasonably have been expected. What's more, we're told the Samaritan gives the innkeeper two denarii. It's reckoned that that would have paid for about three weeks accommodation for this man.

[17:59] And he then even promises to return and settle up whatever extra expense, you know, whatever bar bill or something this guy had run up in the meantime. It's generosity personified.

And we can see why the idea of a good Samaritan still takes hold to this day. It's kind of passed into folklore, really, of people who were willingly, instinctively come to the aid of those in distress.

The good Samaritan is a good example for us all. And yet, I think what's intriguing to all this is to imagine the fourth guy in this story, how he responded to all this.

It's not the priest, not the Levite, not even the Samaritan, but the man himself, the one who'd been left for dead on the road. What do we imagine was going through his mind as this Samaritan man came and cared for him?

Well, in order perhaps to help us work this out, it's worth recalling the way, I think, in which Jesus begins by telling this parable. Here again, how he starts.

[19:05] He says this, A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. A man. It doesn't even give him a name. But since he's walking from Jerusalem down to Jericho, he's likely to have been a Jewish man on his way home from worshipping at a temple.

But by starting his parable in this way, a man was walking down from Jerusalem to Jericho. It seems that Jesus wants to tell this story. He wants us to hear this story from this man's perspective. It's a story about, not the Good Samaritan perhaps, but about this man. Only the man is present in every scene. And so we're being asked to see what happens as if through this man's eyes.

Now, why might that be significant? If you recall, Jesus tells this parable in response to a question which is posed to him by an expert in the law.

A Jewish scholar who knew the scriptures inside out. Indeed, he does know his stuff. Because when Jesus asks him how he might encapsulate the scriptures, he replies by summarizing the law

like this.

[ 20 : 19 ] This guy says, yeah, it's all about this. 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 neighbor as yourself. And if we think these words are familiar, they are.

Because elsewhere, Jesus himself says exactly the same thing when he's asked what the greatest commandments are. Love God with all you are and love your neighbor as yourself.

You know, no wonder Jesus gives this guy a thumbs up and says, you've answered well, you've answered correctly. And yet, even though he's commended this expert in the law, he can't quite leave it there.

He doesn't let it lie. It's almost like his good answer that Jesus commends puffs up his pride a little bit. Because he then seeks to catch Jesus out with a follow-up question. It's love your neighbor as yourself.

He says, all right, who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor? Now, stay with me here. Because I think this is the crucial bit of the whole story.

[ 21 : 19 ] Jesus tells this parable in response to the question, who is my neighbor? And he tells this story from the perspective of the man who's been beaten up.

Jesus wants us to ask, therefore, in the story, who is this man's neighbor? Indeed, Jesus spells it out at the end of his parable.

He asks, he says, which of these three, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, was a neighbor to the man? Now, as we've seen, the one who was a neighbor to this man was the Samaritan.

Not the priest or the Levite, whose help would have been welcomed by this Jewish guy, but the Samaritan, the one who people hated and wouldn't want even to have been touched by, let alone in such a generous and caring way.

And yet, since we're called to love our neighbor as ourselves, I'd say the whole point of this parable is to compel us to love our neighbor and be willing to receive their help, even if we can't stand them.

[ 22 : 37 ] Jesus is challenging his audience, this expert in the law, us, I would say, to treat anyone, even those who we might look down on, even those who are different from us, as neighbors who are capable of caring for us and who are worthy of our love.

I mean, can you imagine how daft it would have been for this man to have rejected this Samaritan's help simply because he was a Samaritan? He'd have been an idiot.

Yes, he'd have had to realign his prejudices, he'd have to eat some humble pie, maybe admit that he'd misjudged them as a people group. But in accepting this Samaritan's offer of help, this man would recognize the humanity in this Samaritan's kindness and learn in time to love him as his neighbor, to love this Samaritan as himself.

And Blumenech, it seems to me, if this lesson from this parable isn't acutely relevant in our times, then I don't know what is. If we look around in our nation right now, we're living with a crippling shortage of HGV drivers, of crop pickers, carers, farm workers, primarily, I would say, because we've told those from European nations who were our neighbors, who were willing to do this work, who were willing to do the jobs that we on a whole as a nation didn't want to do, we're living through this shortage because our Brexit vote told them to go home because we didn't need or want their help.

I appreciate other opinions are available, but that's mine. Yes, of course, there are other factors in these shortages we're going through. But for me, it's no accident that the greatest shortages in our workforce are in the very same jobs that so many Europeans were willing and able to do as our neighbors.

[ 24 : 43 ] And so now, we're now having to wheel in the army to deliver petrol, we're offering emergency visas back to Europeans to come and drive for us because we've realized we now need them as our neighbors.

After all, we need Romanians, we need Poles, Bulgarians, Slovenians, and so on to be our good Samaritans because I'd say our elite, our politician priests and our Levite leaders have been ignoring the problems in their path and have been walking on by.

Who are our neighbors? Or to go back to where we started, it's everyone, the world over, but especially those who we might otherwise see as different to ourselves and who maybe we find it harder to love.

they are the very people who Jesus calls us to love, to love as ourselves. So I sum up.

Yes, let's learn the lessons from the priest by not allowing ourselves to be stifled by the rules, to be stifled in rituals by our ability to put people's well-being first.

[ 26 : 01 ] Yes, let's learn the lesson of the Levite in that our goodness, our kindness, our care will be seen and emulated by others. Yes, let's learn the lesson of the Samaritan, of course, by generously, courageously, compassionately caring for those in need.

But perhaps most of all, today, in our time, I'd say let's learn the lesson of the man himself who put any prejudices aside in order to accept the help of someone who he'd have previously rejected. But in doing so, he would have learned to appreciate, even love this Samaritan as his neighbor, to love him as himself. Thank you.