

34 - THE GOOD NEIGHBOUR

This passage is perhaps the most important *social* parable in The New Testament. Yet it also has universal personal application in every religious tradition or culture. Although Matthew and Mark also tell of similar incidents (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31), only Luke contains the parable.

This is a very active story with seven different individual characters or one group of characters in it: the lawyer, Jesus, the victim of a brutal robbery, traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho, the priest, the Levite, the innkeeper, and finally the robbers.

The lawyer was presumably a Pharisee because he wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. They were the only party who shared that belief.

Jesus used a typical teaching method of asking the lawyer what he knew about the law of Moses, Torah. Jesus praised his response that quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. This was the very heart of Jewish religious and moral law. The answer may have come from a rabbi of Israel who was a contemporary of Jesus. When asked this question by Gentile who promised to be converted if the rabbi could recite the whole Torah while standing on one foot, the rabbi gave this same answer. The Gentile accepted conversion.

Of the man who had been robbed and left for dead by the roadside we know nothing more whatever. We only know that he was severely injured and in obvious need. The issue, however, was not mercy, but love: Who am I to love as much as I love myself. Jesus faced the same issue too, as does God.

The priest and the Levite had their own reasons for passing by the wounded man in the ditch. They may have been afraid of robbers lurking nearby, fearful of ritual contamination, disgusted by someone they presumed to

be dead, or in a hurry to get to their destination. We just don't know. Regardless, they just passed by, avoiding the one they might have helped.

The Samaritan is the odd man in this story, the only non-Jew. His actions from taking pity to the wounded man to attending to his long term convalescence form the heart of the parable.

Jesus again asked the lawyer a question: Who really was the wounded man's neighbour? He answered his own question, but the issue had suddenly changed to something that has universal application. It is not, "Who am I to take pity on in this or in any other situation." It is not that this is the kind of people we should help, i.e. the one who is the *object* of our caring.

Rather, as Sharon Ringe put it, the question becomes: "Who am I in this relationship of neighbouring? ... (B)ecause a fundamental human drive is to be the *subject* - the one doing the action and making the decisions in one's own life."

Our neighbour is the one for whom we feel empathy and identifies as another human being. This approach to life lies at the very heart of discipleship. A new book, *The Empathic Civilization* by Jeremy Rifkin (Penguin 2009), tells us that this is the future of all cultures in the global society we are in the process of creating. Or we shall destroy ourselves.