

The Swiss Church in London

Sermon: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

The Priest, the Levite and the Samaritan

The Priest, the Levite and the Samaritan... who are these three men? We can only fully understand the meaning of the story of the Good Samaritan if we know who they are. Let us begin with the Levite. The Levites are one of the twelve tribes of Israel, descending from Jacob's son Levi. The Levites held important political and religious duties in Israel and played an influential role in the Temple of Jerusalem. Their principle roles were singing psalms during the service, performing maintenance for the temple and serving as guards. The Levites were respected and important people in Israel, as were the Priests, the religious leaders of the temple.

It's a very different story for the Samaritan. The Samaritans too are descendants from Jacob's sons, but they split from the Judean-led Southern Israelites in biblical times. The Samaritans blamed the Israelites for altering religious principles during the Babylonian Exile and claimed to be the legitimate guardians of Ancient Israel. For the Samaritans it was not the Mount Zion in Jerusalem but Mount Gerizim they believed to be the original Holy Place of Israel, and that's also where they worshipped.

Although both the Israelites and the Samaritans belonged to Judaism, the relationship between the two groups was dominated by mistrust and animosity. Perhaps their relationship can be compared to that of Protestants and Catholics until not very long ago. It was strictly forbidden to marry someone from the other group and even talking to each other was frowned upon. According to the Gospel of John, chapter 4, Jesus once spoke to a Samaritan woman who went to draw water from a well, and the disciples were surprised to see their leader speak to a Samaritan. For the people of Israel, the Samaritans were a sect of outsiders. And yet it was the Samaritan who helped the man who had been robbed and hurt. The Priest and the Levite, respected members of the community, walked past him. The disciples of Jesus must have been surprised to hear this parable!

I am not surprised. So often I experience that the most marginalised in our society are the first to help, elderly neighbours helping each other out with shopping or going on hospital visits, or homeless people watching out for each other in the streets. The people who have important roles in our society are often far too busy to take the time to help. To do good requires time, and to take time means to neglect other tasks that we consider important.

Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing

Truth is, we all want to be good and do good. We want to be the Good Samaritan, and sometimes we are. But more often we are not. More often we are the Priest or the Levite walking past that person in need. There is an endless need in this world, at every street corner people who desperately need our help and compassion- we can't respond to them all. The scale of responsibility and the enormity of the challenge are overwhelming.

And yet, despite of all the bad things that happen in this world, I believe in the good of people. I believe that our compassion and love is real and that there is no limit to it. Human compassion is a beautiful thing. It is what glues humanity together and makes our elusive and fragile life on this planet worth living. When we are compassionate and loving we are in God, and God is in us. But there is another side to doing good deeds too. Doing good makes us feel good and it makes us look good in the eyes of others. Perhaps this is the reason why we like to tell others about all the good deeds we have done. "Look at me, I'm a good person!" is what we want the world to know. We want to be applauded for our goodness.

Jesus had something important to say about this. He said:

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, to be honoured by others. When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:1-4)

"Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret." This is a powerful sentence and it puts our good deeds in a whole new light. Imagine doing something good- imagine for instance you walk past a begging woman in the streets of London, a regular occurrence, and you stop and ask the woman if she would like to have breakfast with you, and you take her to a café, buy her breakfast, and after that you give her your brand-new coat. In how far would this experience be different if you told your friends, or if you kept your good deed to yourself? This is what Jesus asks us to do: to keep our good deeds to ourselves.

Doing good deeds is not about us. It doesn't matter what others think of us. It only matters what God thinks of us. God is in our hearts, and that's all that counts.

The hunt for good

The quest for good is a lifelong mission, a never ending task. It is not done with well-meant occasional altruism.

Last week I talked to a homeless woman who told me her life story. This woman had the most incredible unshakable faith. She told me how she had been close to commit a horrible crime a few years back, which would have led to a lifetime in prison, but instead she found faith in Jesus, and it was her faith that kept her from committing this crime. She told me that she was grateful each day for seeing the sky and not the prison ceiling. Her testimony moved me, her approach to faith so different from mine, and yet we had so much in common.

We talked about Adam and Eve, the garden of Eden, the apple, the serpent and the sinfulness of the world, and how we can do good and follow God's calling to be good in a messed up world. At some point she said in a powerful voice: "Good doesn't just come our way. We have to hunt for it, hunt for it, hunt, hunt, hunt."

I wish she was here today to repeat these words to you in her own powerful and charismatic way. To choose good over evil is a lifelong challenge and hugely complex task. If we really want to follow the call to do good we have to question our lifestyle, our choices, we have to take thousands of small decisions every day more consciously. To do good and build the kingdom of God is hard work. There are the obvious things, of course, the most immediate actions, to help our sick neighbour with the shopping, to give a person in need some food or shelter, to give money to charity, visit our sick friend in hospital, and these are all amazing deeds of course that make someone's life better.

But to hunt for what is good means much more than that. The everyday things we do without thinking, our lifestyle has an impact on the environment. In our quest for good we need to think about what we eat, what we wear, how much rubbish ends up in our bin, to know where the products we use come from and who made them under what conditions. Our search for good means not only to do certain things, but also to refrain from doing certain things, for instance to travel less by plane or not at all- very hard for us who live away from our relatives in another country. It means to eat less meat, or even better, to eat none at all. It means that as a church community we have to make conscious and responsible decisions, and in our day and time this means particularly decisions that help save our planet. What does it mean for us as a church community to hunt for the good, to keep hunting and hunting?

What are we ready to give up and change?

To choose good over evil also means not to think badly about others, not to judge, not to bear grudges against the people who have hurt us and to discipline our negative thoughts. To choose good over evil and to hunt for it affects every action and decision, however small or big, conscious and unconscious. This requires discipline, and it requires knowledge. We have to educate ourselves and each other to know what impact our actions have on the world, and we have to discipline ourselves and each other to do what is good and not what is most desirable.

“Flee the evil desires” it says in the second letter of Timothy, “and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

Amen