

for whom do we hold these things in trust?

a sermon preached on the
fifth sunday after pentecost

14 July 2019

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father richard wilson

the lections: Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Ps 25:1-10; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the good Samaritan is so familiar to us, that it barely needs explaining. Indeed, it is one of the few parts of the Bible understood in secular society with a reasonable level of insight. Its great importance lies in Jesus' radical redefinition of our duty to our neighbours. It is 'a timeless classic'. But timeless, because although we have been telling this story to each other for two millennia, we still don't quite live it, do we? Indeed, even a cursory review of the politics and economics of the world demonstrates our enduring resistance to life in proximity with people who are different to us.

Resistance to immigration of refugees – not just in Australia but also in the United States in relation to Mexico, or anyone who looks like a Muslim, and in Europe and UK to North Africans and Middle Easterners is an obvious example. So too is income and wealth inequality growing around the world, within and between nations. I am simply saying again what I have said often from this lectern and which you know, I believe, very well.

The Gospel and Deuteronomy centre on what the commandments of God (the law, the Torah) require in relation to our treatment of our neighbours. Jesus reinterprets the law for a new generation, a new community. As members of this new community we understand the differentiation Jesus makes, as he holds up the action of the good Samaritan as a standard that critiques and fulfils the tradition of the law, of the Torah.

To do so, Jesus illustrates two forms of neighbourliness. One is based in the social construction of the Deuteronomic code in the Torah that understands the neighbour as one who is within the limits of a clearly defined community. One who lives by a set of socially constructive rules, one who is, by their behaviour and character – *in* the community. In this social construction, certain rules exclude the non-compliant. Outsiders are marked as ritually impure, as non-persons and anyone who consorts with them is ritually impure by association. In the Good Samaritan story, this neighbourliness is demonstrated by the priest and the Levite.

Because the purity status of the man robbed, bashed and lying on the side of the road could not be determined, the priest and the Levite, in order to preserve their personal status of ritual spotlessness, had to take measures to avoid the man. Offering assistance was not an option. The priest and the Levite rely on this traditional Deuteronomic interpretation of community. A modern-day version of this practice can be seen in Orthodox Jewish communities, some clubs and societies and in this nation's immigration and Indigenous rights policies that place the refugee and Indigenous out of sight of conventional society, ritually impure.

The second form of neighbourliness is demonstrated by the Samaritan man. Samaritans are not Jews, they were reviled by the Jews, and he is not bound by their exclusive rules. His behaviour evinces a much broader view and generosity in his duty of neighbourliness.

On seeing the man on the side of the road the Samaritan performs, given the Jewish sensibilities of the time, outrageous and community-defying actions in order to fulfil his pastoral commitment to the other. Jesus' use of a Samaritan as an icon of orthodox interpretation of the Torah is, obviously, a deliberate provocation.

First, the Samaritan goes near to the man whom the priest and the Levite had avoided because for them proximity was enough to be rendered ritually unclean. The Samaritan goes near to find out what he can do to help. Moreover, he has walked into a space not only of ritual impurity but also of horror — what will he find, what awful wounds will he encounter? Is the man dead? Don't we have that same instinctive repulsion when we approach a car accident, hoping like hell that the police or the ambulance are already there, or at least someone who looks like they know more first-aid than we do?

Next, the Samaritan pours oil and wine on the man's wounds and then he bandages them. Inevitably, he must touch the man, touch his flesh and his blood. Beyond ritual purity, he has risked infection, put his own health in danger.

Fourth, the Samaritan risks being attacked himself — he has no idea whether the robbers might not be concealed, waiting for an opportunity to rob and bash him too. He has prioritised the unknown man's welfare more highly than his own.

Then he takes the man to an inn so that he can be looked after. By tending to his wounds and taking the man to a place of care and safety he is ensuring the man's recovery — he engages directly, personally in the man's welfare.

Finally, the Samaritan demonstrates great generosity in economic terms. He provides for the man without stint by asking the innkeeper to take care of him at whatever cost. He sets no limits.

These are the standards Jesus has set against which our neighbourliness will be measured.

As members of the church, we must test how we measure up against them. What I am about to say, some people will find provocative — but I must proclaim the gospel — however imperfectly — as it speaks to me. And I must start with a caveat and acknowledge the work of a number of people in this parish for the wider community who are our neighbours. They include the Asylum Seeker Support Group, the fundraising committee and its range of initiatives, the Anglicare Auxiliary and the Friends of St John's. And my apologies in advance if I have left anyone out.

However, apart from these and the separate personal charitable contributions that some people make, do we as a parish really come near to others in the community as neighbours on a scale and depth that matches our resources?

My first observation is on hospitality. At the moment this community preserves traditions that reach back 40, 50, 60 years maybe even further. We are comfortable with those traditions, but how inviting and hospitable are they to others? Do we make any effort to provide a liturgy and related services that accommodate the needs of people who don't share our heritage? Sunday 8 and 10 no longer works for many working parents with kids who play sport, for instance; they are at Auskick or the cricket. You could not say Choral Evensong is in any way mainstream in Australian culture. Sure, it attracts people, but they are already in the fold; it does not grow the church. Several attempts I have made to establish a contemplative Saturday vigil mass that is open to a different part of the community have been blocked.

The decline in attendance of this church and most others in our national church suggests a pattern.

This is not to say that we shouldn't maintain our traditions, but I would argue, we also need to meet society more openly, rather than according to our own preferences. Without being more culturally open and adventurous we run the risk of maintaining a museum that no one wants to visit.

When I first came to this parish, we had an active ministry of providing for the homeless – in terms of provision of food, sometimes funds, and by working to find them accommodation. We have now concluded we are not equipped to do this and have ‘outsourced it’ to Camcare. We have rationalised this action by saying these are professional beggars who go from parish to parish — well of course they do, they have to – to survive. So what? Two researchers from the University of Melbourne writing on *The Conversation* website this week point out that the needs of professional beggars are still real, even though they annoy us; when they are for us ritually impure, they still need help.

To say we are not equipped to deal with the needy and homeless is a convenient evasion. We are recipients of an income from our property development next door of something approaching half a million dollars annually. From this we could easily provide much more to the wider community than we do. On the financial performance of the parish as at March, I note we contribute just over 2% of our total parish income on the welfare of people outside it. We should remember that the income from the property next door is a windfall, it is not directly contributed by members of the parish, rather we are trustees of it. Trustees for what purpose, you might ask.

The financial reports show that the windfall from the property next door, this great wealth that we hold in trust, is used for ourselves. It is spent on our entertainments, to hire musicians for our own pleasure, for food and drink for ourselves, to maintain the splendour of this place. Demonstrably, with the exceptions I have mentioned, we prioritise our own welfare before the welfare of the marginalised – those whom Jesus and the Samaritan man remind us are our true neighbours.

On the yardstick of the Good Samaritan, I would argue we need to rethink, radically, the use of the parish funds. We need to reassess our mission action plan. We need to rethink our place in society beyond our particular community. We need to think about what good we might do with the money we have available. I believe that the windfall profits of the building next door should be spent only on provision for people who are not members of the parish. That is the challenge of today’s Gospel.