

# *saved by the inside-outsider*

a sermon preached on the

*eighth sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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

I think we can take it 'as read' that the ethical teaching in today's gospel is sufficiently transparent as to require little explanation. That it is perfectly possible for people proclaiming Christian faith to justify the very kinds of un-Christlike actions so graphically exposed in the parable Jesus tells is so revealing – this is what strikes me as very interesting. It reminds us – in case we needed reminding – that the sacred scriptures in general, and the gospels in particular, are not primarily books of law. This fact escapes many people – indeed many church people.

If all we needed were a set of laws to follow, then none of what we are doing here today would be necessary. If Christian faith was merely a moral code – as many people perceive it to be – then it could be better accomplished by the machinery of the state, which is in fact now the case.

Like all religions, Christian teaching simply assumes that moral conduct is a foundational matter of being human. Furthermore, we can find the same essential teaching about our moral responsibility to our fellow humans – the so-called 'Golden Rule' – predating Christianity by many centuries, in all of the great religious traditions.

So what, then, is distinctive here – if anything at all? If the story is not primarily an ethical teaching, then what is it?

I have suggested in today's *Contact* that the wisdom of the Christian spiritual tradition is to invite the disciple to meditate upon the question – rather than rushing off to 'answers', and certainly not to schemes, programmes, and strategies. That is to confuse Christian 'mission' for business plan.

It is the *question* that has the power to transform us, to break open our hearts, to deepen our experience of the Divine Love who is 'all in all'. Trust the questions: this is ancient spiritual wisdom. It is the question which opens the space required to make way for the "knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding".<sup>1</sup>

Who, then, is my neighbour?

When we attempt to rush to answer the question – rather than simply allowing the question to interrogate us – we almost certainly end up in moralising legalistic territory, and the attempt to justify ourselves. But when we wait upon the question we find that an entirely unexpected space opens up. It's the space that questions foster – which answers shut down.

And we soon find that it is we ourselves who inhabit that space. And then we come to see that the one asking the question is in fact someone – so to speak – who is in fact within us. The 'lawyer' is actually an inner aspect of ourselves. The inner lawyer feels the need to justify, to make rigid categories, to prove worth – which one is in the 'neighbour' category, which one is not.<sup>2</sup>

And then we realise that this inner lawyer is like an adversary – endlessly interrogating us, from within. And then we realise that the person 'who falls into the hands of robbers' is actually ourselves! It is we who are accosted by the unruly and malevolent forces of life; we who are left bashed and bleeding and half dead by life's roadside.<sup>3</sup> Then our shock is deepened when we come to see that it is *we* who are the priest who walks by on the other side.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, it is some part of ourselves who is the Levite crossing the road.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 1:9

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:29

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:30

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:31

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:32

This is a great confrontation – for that is precisely what the gospel is, a confrontation with the truth that sets us free. By staying with the question we come to see that the story Jesus tells is about *ourselves* – about those aspects of ourselves which we have denied or suppressed. And we may well be shocked when we realise that the bashed and bleeding aspect of ourselves is actually despised by the puritan, legalistic aspects of ourselves. And it takes time, space, silence and attentiveness to notice these things – much as one stands in awed and reverent silence before a great work of art.

But then – just when we are reeling from the shock of this situation – we see an outsider, a foreigner aspect of ourselves unexpectedly appear. It is the despised part of ourselves – not the respectable, presentable, articulate, well-educated, charming part – but the despised part who turns out to be the compassionate one, who spares no trouble or expense.<sup>6</sup> The Greek word Luke the evangelist uses here is the very same word we heard just a few weeks ago<sup>7</sup> – **splagnizomai** *splagnizomai* – it is the despised part of ourselves whose guts turn with compassion.

So it turns out that we are saved, profoundly ministered to, by that which we despise about ourselves, the inner equivalent of ‘Samaritan’. It is the despised ‘outsider’ part of ourselves who is truly compassionate and truly benevolent.

This is the real shock – and the good news that is truly *new* – of the Christian revelation, which we still can barely grasp. It is the despised victim outsider, Jesus the Christ, who in fact ‘saves’ us from the trap of legalistic moralising religion.<sup>8</sup>

So the ‘Samaritan’ of the parable turns out to be a figure for the despised Christ. But of course! For like every part of the gospel, today’s parable is yet another way of expressing the Paschal Mystery.

Attending to the question has, then, enabled us to avoid the pitfalls of moralising and legalism – and instead brought us to the deeper awareness of the despised foreigner within, in whose hands our lives are in fact held. And this makes all the difference – to us, and to those who we encounter on the road. ‘Go and do likewise’<sup>9</sup> becomes not a matter of law; but an unstoppable and joyous overflowing of compassion which naturally flows from the despised aspect of ourselves.

In the Eucharist this pattern is made fleshy: what is broken and poured out is ourselves – that despised part of ourselves – which unites us with God and with each other.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 10:34-35

<sup>7</sup> Luke 7:13, from the gospel for Pentecost 3

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:28

<sup>9</sup> Luke 10:37