

The Good Samaritan – Kate Day

“Turn right. Keep going to the junction – about half a mile. Straight on. Down the hill a bit, then take the first turning on the left. We’re right at the end.”

Clearly the directions from somewhere to somewhere else. But where? Where are we starting from? Where are we going? Without knowing the question – “how do I get from our house to our friends’ house”, the answer doesn’t really make sense. In fact, unless you know where you’re starting from, those directions could take you to the wrong place entirely.

And I promise this is related to this week’s parable – The Good Samaritan.

We know the story so well, don’t we? It’s a staple of school assemblies, of Messy Churches and of family services.

It gives a lovely Christian message. Be kind. One that it hard to disagree with, however you see God (or not.) And who would want to anyway? Being kind is good.

And when we want to emphasise that it’s a lovely *Christian* message, we emphasise that it’s “be kind to those who you don’t really like”.

But what if that’s not the full story? What if, by starting with the parable story, rather than with why Jesus told it, we’ve missed something important? Just like with the directions – unless you know where you’re starting from, you might not end up where you’re meant to be.

Let’s have a look.....

If you have a Bible to hand, you can find the parable in Luke’s gospel, Chapter 10, and the important thing is that although the tale itself begins at verse 30, we really need to start at verse 25.

With a lawyer. Not a sorting-out-the-legals-on-a-house-move-type lawyer, nor a Rumpole-of-the-Bailey type lawyer, but an expert in the religious Law, the Torah. Someone who knew and studied the writings which told the people how God wanted them to live. He seems pretty keen, this lawyer, because he asks Jesus what he needs to do to inherit eternal life.

And as so often, Jesus answers his question with a question. “What’s written in the law? What do you read there?”

The lawyer gives the text book answer – “to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself”.

“Very good”, Jesus says. “you have given the right answer. Do this and you will live.”

Clearly it is “the right answer” Let’s note here, though, that there is a difference between knowing the answer, and knowing what the answer means. How it works out in every day life.

Let’s also note that Jesus says that he will live, rather than that he will inherit eternal life. Which elsewhere is translated as “life in abundance”, “life in all its fulness.” Quality as well as quantity of life.

Back to the lawyer. He wants to win the point. He has a supplementary question. “Who is my neighbour?” Basically he is saying, “I know what love is, just show me where to deploy it. Show me where the boundaries to love lie, so that I can be sure that I abide by them. So that I can know that I’ve been kind, observed the Law and ticked the necessary boxes”

Jesus is God and he loves this lawyer (whatever the lawyer thinks of him), so he tells a story which shows him what love really looks like. He lifts the whole question and turns it around to reveal that love, not law, is at the heart of God’s relationship with human beings.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho....” And Jesus tells about how the man was mugged and left for dead.

About how the Priest and the Levite “saw him” but “passed by the other side”

About the Samaritan, who “came near him and saw him” and “who was moved with pity”.

About how even the hated, lower than the low, beneath contempt Samaritan takes care of the man, at significant personal cost to himself, and how he takes responsibility for the ongoing care of the man. And can I suggest here that despite what some may have said, the focus of the story is not that the Samaritan had the money to pay the innkeeper. He paid him two days’ wages. Maybe that was all he had?

And so Jesus says to the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

The lawyer was asking as an “in/out” question. A question which limits his responsibilities. Is it the person who farms the next plot to mine? Is it someone in my village? Is it someone in my tribe? Who?

But through this story, Jesus says, “Your neighbour is anyone who needs neighbourly love. And even the Samaritans get this.”

And I wonder if he is also saying

“But sadly, some of the leaders of the people of Israel don’t get it. And they don’t get it big time. Because not only do they not “get” the “loving my neighbour as myself”, they don’t get the “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” bit either. Because if they did, they couldn’t possibly have behaved in the way they did in the story. In the way they do.”

The priest and the Levite both saw the man. But they saw the man through the filter of their own rules-based tradition. They “passed by” because they thought God was more interested

in whether they were “following the rules” of being ritually clean or not; rather than recognising that the God of love would absolutely want them to respond to his love by showing love and care and compassion to the injured man.

By contrast, the Samaritan came close. Close enough to see not just a bleeding bundle of rags but the person, the human individual loved by God, the person in need of help. The Samaritan allowed himself to be moved with pity. He saw through God’s eyes of mercy and compassion, and responded with that mercy and compassion. And he was generous, as God is generous. Even the despised Samaritan was closer to loving the LORD with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, than the religious leaders. Who were only interested in their own souls. In ticking the boxes. In “being good.”

So what does all this have to say to us?

I would suggest that when we read the story of the Good Samaritan in isolation, we miss at least part of the point. It’s not really a question of “who is my neighbour” but of how we “see” and respond to the world around us. If we see it only through the lens of right and wrong, of being good or being kind, we will put limits around our response. We will see a problem not a person. We will start asking questions of who “deserves” our compassion. Who should be in and who should be kept out.

But when we read the story of the Good Samaritan from the point of loving the LORD our God with all our being, when we read it through God’s eyes, we too will be moved to be merciful, compassionate and generous – without limits – just as God is merciful, generous and compassionate to us. Which is, after all, the “eternal life” which the lawyer was seeking in the first place.