

Sermon on Luke 10: 25-37 How Do You Read It?¹

Sometimes when we read Scripture we assume that it has just one plain meaning.

We assume it's something akin to a door with a lock.

Find the right key and the door will open and we will walk through into the land of Scriptural enlightenment and meaning.

Only one key will open the door and until we find it the door will remain locked.

Yet this is a mistake.

More often than not, Scripture is more like a great work of art than a door.

Look at a great painting from a different angle and you will see different colours.

Different shapes.

Different emphases.

Listen to a great piece of music on a different day, perhaps when you are in a different mood and you will hear different shades of harmony and timbre.

The wonder of Scripture, especially such deep and expansive texts as the good Samaritan, is that like the great work of art, it can be read in different ways, from different angles, and a richness of meaning can be revealed which is multi-valent, which has many angles and insights and cannot be reduced to one or another.

That multiple readings can each be faithful at once without squeezing the text into a single mould..

This is certainly not to make the relativist mistake of saying that all readings are equally true or reasonable.

Some simply aren't and there's quite a conversation we could have about how we discern truthful and reasonable readings (and those not so...).

¹ I am indebted especially to Richard Lischer's *Reading the Parables*, (Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KN, 2014), for the frame and approaches to reading the parable of the Good Samaritan I refer to in this sermon.

But one of the great joys of reading Scripture together within the tradition of the church is finding new insights, new revelations; that God continues to speak to us through this venerable collection of inspired books and stories we call the Bible.

That as we read from our context we read with fresh eyes.

And who knows, you, we, may just find insights not considered before, through which God might offer us new shards of light of the KOG.

So today we're reading and re-reading the parable of the Good Samaritan, a familiar story...

You know the story...

An expert in the law asks Jesus, 'How do I inherit eternal life?'

Jesus makes the lawyer answer his own question: 'Well, what's written in the law, how do you read it?'

'Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself.', the lawyer replies.

'You have answered correctly' says Jesus, 'do this and you shall live.'

'But who is my neighbour...?'

'Well, a man was going down from Jerusalem from Jericho.

He was set upon by robbers, beaten, stripped, thrown in a ditch and left for dead.

A priest came by, saw the man, and passed by on the other side.

Then a Levite did exactly the same thing, he too kept on walking.

Finally, a Samaritan comes by. He has compassion. He stops, binds the man wounds, pours on ointment, puts him on his donkey and takes him to an inn where he cares for him.

He pays the innkeeper to care for him and agrees to reimburse him for any additional expenses.

Now, which one of these was a neighbour to the man?', Jesus asks.

'The one who had mercy.'

'Go and do likewise.'

So, just as Jesus asks the expert in the law, 'how do you read it?', so we ask ourselves the same question?

How do we read the story of the Good Samaritan?

1) Moral/plain reading

The first reading we might make is the *plain moral reading*.

This was the view favoured by the Reformer John Calvin who tended away from the more allegorical readings of the early church.

Calvin felt that the plain meaning of a text should not be subservient to more allegorical speculative readings.

It says what it says, it is what it is.

The parable is a straight forward moral lesson about our neighbourliness and compassion to one another.

As the question of the lawyer is, 'who is my neighbour?', the plain moral answer of Jesus' parable is 'everyone' from whatever race or creed, and especially those in distress.

The priest and the Levite walk on by with a cold heartlessness, but the Samaritan is a true neighbour to the man in the ditch.

So should we be.

Confirming this reading is Jesus' final instruction to the lawyer, 'Go and do likewise.'

A plain moral instruction.

We are to be like the Samaritan.

Loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves, Jesus' summary of the commandments is the Christian life wrapped up in two straight forward commands.

This is what Jesus in the parable.

The plain moral meaning cannot be obscured and should not.

2) Allegorical reading

The plain moral meaning is always a good place to start with such parables, the question is, is there anything more we can say?

In this case the church tradition says yes, in fact a lot more.

A second way of reading the parable is as an allegory.

This method of reading opens up a vast array wider meaning.

The most common allegorical interpretation is to see the Good Samaritan as Jesus, and the man in the ditch as 'Adam', or indeed the whole human race in need of rescue.

Jesus is the one we least expect.

The one who surprises us with a new found love and compassion.

Jesus is the one who is different to us who reaches out, binds our wounds, and pulls us out of the ditch of sin and despair calling us to a new life of service.

Jesus is the one who continues to care for our needs by putting us in the care of the church and seeing to our welfare ongoing in faith and prayer.

Readers from Augustine on down have taken this approach.

The parable becomes a self reflexive, self referential story on Jesus' lips which reveals the hidden love of God in the least likely place, a wandering Jew/Samaritan from Nazareth who would eventually die for all the world.

We can feel ourselves in that ditch at different points in life, and as we all know when a kind word, or caring gesture comes along, it is indeed balm for our wounds and we feel the presence of God alongside us.

Yet, others like Julian of Norwich have read an even more intriguing, even as Rick Lischer says, mystical, allegory in the text.

A Trinitarian allegory. A vision of the heart of God.

Christ is not the Samaritan, but the man in the ditch, the one whose wounds inflicted by the heartlessness of humanity have saved us.

For Julian it works the other way around.

In the form of the Samaritan, God raises his Son out of the ditch, up from the grave, and so we are all saved by God through Christ who represents and embodies us all.

When we read the parable as a whole we get, not just a plain moral meaning, but a picture of the love of God in the Godhead.

Where is the Holy Spirit?

Well, in the innkeeper of course who will care for us ongoing and continue to minister the love the Samaritan, God, has lavished upon us by raising the man, Jesus, out of the ditch.

This reading is the least likely of all the readings, yet, again, it provides a different angle.

The vision of Christ as the man in the ditch/cross and God the Father as the Samaritan is compelling if probably moving out beyond the normal limits of how the parable may be read.

3) Prophetic/Political/Moral Reading

Yet another way of reading the parable is with an overlay of a number of approaches, but accenting the prophetic and political.

In his day, MLK Jnr preached on this parable many times and saw in it a prophetic message to America.

America, he said, was in the ditch.

America had lost its way on a dangerous road and succumbed to racism, bigotry, and prejudice, the very things that would tear it apart and from which it required rescue.

America needed rescue from itself, from its own wayward ways, and so it was entirely consonant that its help would come from within it, but from an unexpected voice.

King saw in the Samaritan, the mysterious other who is bound to the man in the ditch in compassion, a correspondence with the black civil rights movement of his day.

It would not rescue the man/America out of the ditch through further violence or force, it would come in peace, non-violence, and with healing in its hands to say, 'can we walk this way together?'

Can we change together?

And becoming a new people?

That there was historical animosity between Jews and Samaritans, an animosity which went back centuries, only intensified the power of the story in this regard.

The Samaritan was the outsider like the black civil rights movement, yet way back when the Jews and the Samaritans were one people.

In the voice of King, the good Samaritan became a prophetic narrative of the redemption of a nation and one which asked America to look into its own heart, deep into its soul to search after its identity; to search after the God it said it professed.

Perhaps at the difficult moment America finds itself in today there may well again be insight to be found in the story of a man rescued from the pitfalls of a dangerous road by a mysterious outsider who is yet familiar.

So, how do you/we read it?

How do we hear it?

How does it speak to us today?

Any of these readings may well have something to say to us, yet the primary question is how we read in our context?

What personal, political, ecclesial, truth emerges out of the ditch in the saving action of the good Samaritan?

As we read in company with the tradition of the church we may well find nuances of compassion, hospitality, surprise, rescue, the crossing of old hostilities, forgiveness, relationship, and so on.

This is what the church tells us the parable is about.

It provides our guide to reading in our time.

These are the staples of the story.

Yet if we're reading carefully there will no doubt be more.

More light and truth to break forth from his word, as the hymn says.

This will require an openness of spirit, a life of prayer, and a willingness to be challenged.

There is no fixed answer, no promise of this or that truth emerging.

There is only a question, and an invitation to walk down the Jericho road of faith in search of the Christ who comes to us in many ways, and be willing to be rescued.

It is a question/invitation for us all together and for us each as persons made in God's image:

How do you read it?

Amen.