

SERMON: Sunday – 10 July 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

On loving neighbours

Luke 10:25-37

If ever there was a parable of Jesus that justified the non wearing of clerical garb for people in religion then this might be it. The parable of the good samaritan paints a poor picture of those in clerical robes.

That's not to say that the wearing of clerical gear is wrong. What matters, is that any such outward signs of religion need to be matched by an ever greater regard for doing good or doing the right thing.

It's actions that matter more than words. It's mercy and compassion that are needed more than to be seen to be religious. It's kindness that's greater than keeping up appearances.

Those who should've known better are seen to be those who walk on by on the other side; caring not for the foreigner for he wasn't "one of us".

All of which challenges us to ask, when did we walk on by? When did we pass up the chance to help someone in need, albeit someone we didn't know or associate with or even share the same language with? Who do we still walk past today?

The parable isn't there to teach us about what to wear or teach us to feel bad about ourselves for the times we have walked on by or avoided something that would've cost us our time or money or reputation.

I think the parable teaches us that God's ways are not our ways. God doesn't ignore or walk on by. God is the Saviour of all, who stops to bind up the wounds of all who've fallen. God embodies, in Jesus, a kingdom of grace which doesn't count the cost but just gives unreservedly.

It's that life that we're invited to love, and walk in the footsteps of, in the same Spirit as, the imitation of Christ.

As John says in the third letter of John,

11 Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God.

Human beings are made in God's likeness which means we're made to be like God, to live and act as God would, and Jesus, of course, is that perfect example of what that looks like.

As Jesus summed up the parable to the teacher of the law, "Go and do likewise."; in other words, show mercy, be merciful.

And as Paul urges the Ephesians that living out the life of Christ is "to be made new in the attitude of (y)our minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (4:23-24).

In this parable, we find Jesus teaching that loving the Lord with all one's heart, the summation of the Law, involves being merciful and loving neighbours as much as loving God. In fact, the two can't be separated. You can't do one without the other. To love God is to love neighbour and to love neighbour is to love God. And that means embracing, loving, this way of life that Jesus speaks of.

I suppose this could mean that some unlikely people even love God without knowing it, like the Samaritan in the parable. There are so many people "out there" who do kind things with and for neighbours but not in the name of any religion or for a God they profess to know or follow.

I'm sure God commends such folk, and so should we. And in the final judgement, or the end of all things as far as each of us is concerned, I wonder if they will be among the ones who surprise us on entering into life eternal before us even.

For remember, this parable is told in response to the rich man's question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Some people will inherit eternal life without asking for it.

Now I know, you're going to say, but what about scriptures such as it is "all who call on the name of the Lord (who) will be saved", or (its) "all who believe in him will not perish but inherit eternal life"; or that the only way is through the Father?

I'm not going to prove these for I can't but I have a hunch based on the forgiving grace of the father in Luke's parable of the lost son and elsewhere, that God is so much more forgiving, more gracious, more loving than we ever are. And that gives me hope. Hope for everyone. For eternal life.

Because its not the priest and its not the Levite but the unlikely Samaritan that surprises us with the extravagant kindness of the parable; the costly sacrifice of his time, his money, his own plans and his reputation; all in the name of

compassion, meeting the need of someone in need. This is a portrait of our God at work in unlikely people and in unlikely places.

One of the great themes of Richard Rohr's teachings is the importance of experiencing God's love and delight, and the emptiness of religion without it, perhaps the same kind of emptiness that the priest and the Levite displayed. He has written that,

(SLIDE)

"The trouble with much of civic religion and cultural Christianity is the lack of religious experience. People who haven't had a loving or intimate experience with God tend to get extremely rigid, dogmatic, and controlling about religion. They think that if they pray the right words, read the Bible daily, and go to church often enough, it will happen. But God loves us before we do the rituals. God doesn't need them, but we need them to tenderly express our childlike devotion and desire—and to get in touch with that desire. The great commandment is not "thou shalt be right." The great commandment is to "be in love."

Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

I think it was Thomas Merton who said about this Scripture meaning that actually the best way to love ourselves is to love others.

So, whenever we have the chance, to do a kind thing for someone in need, let's take it. Because we never know, it might just be a key to the kingdom of heaven. Let's be alert to the daily opportunities for ministry, to be like the Good Samaritan, stopping rather than waking by, being alert rather than ignoring, not being frightened to get down in the dirt, for its down there we might well find something of life for us and maybe for someone else too.

In one of today's other readings we read how the Apostle Paul is encouraged by what he hears from Epaphras of the early Christians at Colossae.

"For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God".

(Colossians 1:9-10)

During the apostle Paul's lifetime, the church was not yet an institution or structural grouping of common practices and beliefs. The church was a living organism that communicated the gospel through relationships. And that living,

breathing organism is the Body of Christ, of which you and I are all members, each playing our different part, under the direction of the Spirit who is Love.

We are connected together in this one body and its together that we're called to love one another, love God and love our neighbour.

God is on our side. We can be at peace. We don't need to live competitively. We have all we need here and now, through the One who is the Source of all good things, the pattern and the fountain of self-giving love.

And so it is from that place in the body, the loving community, that we find the impulse to love our neighbour and love ourselves in the process.

Perhaps nothing else matters.

So let's continue to be part of this loving community seeking to practise neighbour loving wherever we are, here in KNEC and beyond. Where might that lead us in the days to come?