

Week One

Who is my neighbour?

Bible Passage Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ²⁶He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' ²⁷He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.'

²⁸And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' ³⁰Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' ³⁷He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

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Commentary

Many of us have been brought up thinking that this passage is about 'being nice to people even if they're different from us'. But is that what Jesus is really teaching here? The context in Luke's Gospel is a series of incidents in which Jesus seems to be re-drawing the boundaries of who's in and who's outside the blessing of God's 'inheritance', his covenant people. Jesus seems to be letting 'in' all sorts of people who didn't belong in the eyes of the religious authorities: Roman army officers (7:1-10) and their collaborator tax collectors (5:27-32), those whose illness made them ritually 'unclean' (5:12-16 and 8:43-48) and others living immoral lives (7:36-50). So when the lawyer asks Jesus, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' and 'Who is my neighbour?' there's a good chance that the real issue here is also about boundaries. 'What does it take for me to be "in"?' and 'Who's "out"?'

Jesus responds to the lawyer with a story that would have made him angry. It featured a Samaritan, someone considered by most Jews at that time to be an ethnically impure, politically suspect follower of a false religion. The story might just have been bearable if it had featured a good Jew helping a poor, beaten up Samaritan. But instead, Jesus has a Jewish priest flouting God's requirement to show mercy (Micah 6:8) in an attempt to avoid becoming

ritually unclean (i.e. not touching a possible corpse; see Numbers 19:16). Then along comes an 'unclean' Samaritan to demonstrate what it really takes to 'inherit eternal life'.

Jesus in this parable is not calling into question the truth that 'salvation is from the Jews' (John 4:22, and see Luke 3:23-38) or even that the Kingdom of God has boundaries. But he is warning that even 'those who should know better' can be so preoccupied with their own status with God that they miss the heart of what the Kingdom is all about. This story can release us to joyfully engage with any 'neighbour' from the other side of any 'fence' – whether that 'fence' is cultural, religious or ethnic or anything else – in confident, humble love.

Another story

The imam of our local mosque invited me as minister of the parish church to attend the naming ceremony at his house for his new born daughter. During the ceremony, even though I was the only non-Muslim in a room full of other imams, I was the only guest given the honour of being asked to make a speech. Not having been given any notice and needing to think quickly, I spoke about neighbours and told Jesus' story of the Samaritan from Luke 10. Some of the other imams in the room were clearly a little put out that they had been passed over in favour of a Christian. The following day, I met my friend and asked him if he had taken a risk in inviting me to make the speech. He simply replied, 'There are some things I can't do in the mosque, but my home is my home.' As I reflected on the encounter, I realised that while I had talked about being a neighbour, he had had been a real neighbour to me.

Questions

- Do you think there were risks involved in Jesus including 'unclean' and morally dubious people among his followers?
- If Jesus were telling the story today in your context, who might he choose in the place of the Samaritan?
- Have you ever had an experience (or heard of one) where someone culturally or religiously different from yourself acted like a neighbour to you? Share that with the group.

Hymn

Suggested tune Blaenwern

Jesus calls us here to meet him
as through word and song and prayer
we affirm God's promised presence
where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
praise the Son who calls us friends;
praise the Spirit who, among us,
to our hopes and fears attends.

Jesus calls us to confess him
Word of Life and Lord of All,
sharer of our flesh and frailness
saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
tell his tales that all may hear;
tell the world that Christ in glory
came to earth to meet us here.

Jesus calls us to each other:
vastly different though we are;
language, colour, class and gender
neither limit nor debar.
Join the hand of friend and stranger;
join the hands of age and youth;
join the faithful and the doubter
in their common search for truth.

Jesus calls us to his table
rooted firm in time and space,
where the church in earth and heaven
finds a common meeting place.
Share the bread and wine, his body;
share the love of which we sing;
share the feast for saints and sinners
hosted by our Lord and King.

John L Bell (born 1949) and Graham Maule (born 1958)

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A prayer for Lent:

*Bless to us, O God
the doors we open,
the thresholds we cross,
the roads that lie open before us.
Help us, this Lent, to recognise the values of your Kingdom
wherever we see them,
and so learn what it means to be your kind of neighbour,
for Jesus' sake
Amen*

(Adapted from the Iona Community)