14 July 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
The Revd Canon Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor

‘The Good Samaritan’

Today’s Gospel is one of the most well-known stories Jesus ever told, the story of the Good Samaritan after which countless charities, hospitals and organisations have been named. But like many well-known things, it’s easily left unexamined and misunderstood. One of the greatest tragedies of this beautiful short story is how it has been used by countless Christians down the ages as part of an anti-semitic agenda. The Labour party are not the only ones who have to look carefully at themselves here! It’s so easy for preachers and communities to portray the failure of the priest and the Levite as a broader condemnation of Jewish legalism and ceremony; or for us to focus in on the ancient antipathies between Jews and Samaritans as if they’re somehow any different from all the other prejudices and enmities we live with daily. And this is all the sadder given that a truer understanding comes, as so often, from understanding the Jewish context of the Gospel and more fundamentally the Jewishness of Jesus.

‘For behold a certain nomikos stood up to test (or tempt) him, saying…’ Our translation said lawyer and that’s sort of right, nomos is law in Greek but we shouldn’t imagine a solicitor or QC from modern-day judicial proceedings. This was a scholar of the Torah, the books of Moses, known as the Law, and today we need to have in our minds far more a scholar or biblical theologian in a seminar rather than a lawyer in a courtroom. And of course Jesus directs him to his own field of knowledge ‘What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?’

Now we tend to not think much of the act of reading – it’s so everyday and normal. We are used to authorised texts, verifiable versions on the internet, clarity of every detail. But in the ancient world, reading was a very different and much more exclusive pursuit. Whereas today word division, punctuation and agreed formatting means that we move swiftly from text to meaning; in the ancient world the first task of the reader was to
determine the text, to work out which letters belonged to which word; which word to which sentence; as almost all Latin, Greek and Hebrew text was simply a stream of letters, with occasional abbreviations, to save stone or papyrus. Hebrew was even worse as the ancient biblical texts we find at the Dead Sea and elsewhere from this period did not have any vowels marked. The texts were simply streams of consonants to which the reader supplied vowels for as they read aloud, leading to a whole oral tradition of commentary arguing over not just the meaning of the words as in modern theology but the very words themselves. I may write SN but do I mean sun, sin, sane or something else? Only context would tell.

Most of the time people learned the tradition well enough to simply ‘get it right’ – a little like early renaissance music where sharps and flats and all other manner of little flourishes and embellishments were not included in a score but left to the singers and musicians to simply ‘know’. But there were always some controversial texts that made sense grammatically and even theologically in multiple ways. And it was one of these that our scholar quotes back to Jesus – Leviticus 19:18 – ‘Love your resh ayin as yourself’. Is that key word to be pointed re’a (the one who lives nearby) or ra’ (enemy)?

Jesus and the scholar are not talking in a vacuum but in the midst of a rich and vital scholarly debate. These two texts from Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18) had already been brought together in the works that would become the Testaments of Issachar and Dan, as many other Jewish teachers besides Jesus and this anonymous scholar wanted to link love of God to love of others. And this scholar seemingly locates himself in the tradition that will come to later Judaism through Rabbi Akiva in stressing love of the neighbour as the stranger, the sojourner, the one who comes from outside the community and joins you. This is ‘how he reads it’ (Lk. 10:26).

At first Jesus seems to support him, ‘You have answered correctly’ (Lk. 10:28) and telling a tale which follows the classic rule of three: as a man goes down to Jericho on ‘the bloody road’ (cf. Jerome), is unsurprisingly attacked by the sort of robbers who often lay in wait there, and then along come a priest, a Levite and…another. We should not for a second imagine that the first two are setting up a critique of the religious demands on ritual purity. Yes, Leviticus 21 and Numbers 19 declared those who touched corpses unclean but scholars regularly stressed that this never prohibited saving lives or burying the dead (eg. m.Naz. 7.1). Indeed, burying a corpse was one of the highest Jewish sacred duties and it was rarely challenged, except of course by Jesus himself with his declaration, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead’ (Lk. 9:60).
No, if we were properly immersed in ancient culture, we would know that the sequence
bad priest, then bad Levite, sets us up for the third and good person to be an ordinary
Israelite. Not someone descended from Aaron or Levi but an everyday Jew, like his
disciples. And this is where Jesus turns all expectations on their head by bringing in the
Samaritan – an enemy from across a great cultural divide, that went back 800 years to the
intermarriage of the Israelites with their Assyrian invaders and the loss of all claim to be
true descendants of Jacob or worshippers of the Lord.

Rather than choosing between re’a and ra’, Jesus makes the astonishing theological move
to collapse the two – by showing us that it’s in acts of gracious love that the one we think
is our enemy becomes our neighbour. Like much in Luke’s Gospel this is a radical claim
that cuts across the heart of ancient theological debate to show a new way, a new form of
love, a new approach that includes the marginalised and the oppressed, the poor and the
widow. Don’t categorise or exclude but reach out, as God does, in love.

Two thousand years ago Jesus asked this young scholar to expand his heart, to widen his
vision and he does the same to us here and now today. We shame his teaching if we allow
this parable to be used as an anti-Semitic text to show the superiority of Christians.

So let us end today with a parable of a different rabbi whose teaching seems a lot closer to
that of Jesus than many sermons on this subject. A rabbi once asked his students, ‘How
can we know when dawn has truly come?’ One student answered confidently, ‘It is when
you can look at the trees and tell an olive from a fig.’ Another said, ‘Surely it is when you
can tell a sheep from a goat.’ But the rabbi said, ‘No, unless you can look at a stranger
and see a brother or a sister, it doesn’t matter what time it is, it is still night.’

May we look at strangers and see brothers and sisters, may we turn to our enemies and
discover neighbours, and in the name of him who did not pass by our broken humanity
but lifted us up and healed us, may we never pass by anyone on the other side.