



Sermon preached by Revd David Tatem on 10th July 2022

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Corinthians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Every metaphor has its limitations as I'm sure you will agree! They take you so far but no further, especially if you start trying to treat them as exact descriptions of a reality. So juggling as a metaphor for developing Christian discipleship has, if you will forgive the pun, to be handled with care.

Actually, learning to drive is a better metaphor, because for the majority of those of us who are car drivers, the first time we got behind the steering wheel it's been a case of crashed gears, kangaroo starts, the instructor having to put on the dual control brake to stop you trying to drive through the gap you used to be able manage quite easily on a bicycle and so on until you reach the point where it does become a kind of second nature and you pass your test and then, as I was told by my instructor back in 1969, you can begin to learn to drive. He was a good instructor not least because he said you will never stop learning. There will always be new surfaces and conditions to learn how to handle and there are other road users for you to consider and maybe sometimes to avoid but also to learn how to drive giving due consideration to and being helpful towards so that their driving experience is improved and made safer. Not to mention pedestrians, bicycles, horses and even as I discovered a couple of weeks ago driving on unfenced roads on Dartmoor, ponies, sheep, cows and so on...

These days there a host of other considerations too, relating to the environment. Even if we haven't been able to change our car yet to electric or hydrogen, there are things about driving style that can reduce emissions and use less fuel and we can with great responsibility plunge down the rabbit hole of the debate about whether switching to electric really is better given the resources required to produce the batteries in the first place and there is the question of the ethical or political values of the car producer, and so on. All in all, a lot of careful thought and determination is needed if we are to be responsible and mature car owners and drivers who other people can be glad to encounter on the roads and not sorry.

You can argue that giving up driving and only using public transport is the best option but for the purposes of this sermon, that's where the metaphor breaks down because giving up any attempt at Christian Discipleship is not exactly the best way to engage with it!

As has been said; 'the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing'.

Metaphors and analogies can be useful in making us think and so can parables which is why Jesus used them so effectively and although the parable of the Good Samaritan is about people who are travelling that's not really the point of it, it's essentially about the difference between doing something that ought to be second nature, an automatic way of responding when you come across a situation that looks like a road accident and the other reaction, which is to allow other secondary considerations to get in the way and block what ought to be done out of simple humanity.

It's clear and goes without saying that the Priest and the Levite both should, of course, have stopped immediately and gone to the man's aid.

The problem is that they are so wrapped up in what the law says about becoming unclean by touching a dead body and the impact that would have on their roles in the temple, that they cannot allow the far more pressing demand of the law, to act with compassion to take priority. On the other hand, the disagreeable Samaritan, not only a stranger but someone representing a despised community that had gone away from the Law, this character actually has the essence of the law written in his heart in a way that overrides even the more understandable fear that the robbers might still be around looking for another potential victim and does for the man what is needed. He even extends his help by being prepared to come back later and pay the innkeeper whatever else is needed to see him back on his feet.

It would be interesting to extend an acting out of that story beginning with the man being found and helped up to the point the story finishes but then carrying on to explore what the relationship between the victim and his rescuer might become in the future and what the results might be, perhaps bringing about some reconciliation between at least parts of the two communities. It fits well with Jesus telling us that we should love our enemies, which is not a requirement to have warm feelings towards them but to act towards them in the same way you would act towards your friends or family. Any act of compassion towards someone in need, whoever they may be, is a gift not only to the person in need, but to the future. We may not know how things will work out but it opens up possibilities rather than closes them down.

Perhaps the priest and the Levite, in their private thoughts, hoped the man was dead so the story could end there and then, closed down; but the Samaritan's first act of checking, opens up the future even maybe beyond what can be done for the man.

There's also something in reading this story about the use of scripture. We read it as it has been passed down to us and it assists our learning, it assists the development of our own discipleship. The story itself contains the element of how earlier scriptures had been read and learned from or not learned from. The implication in the story is that if those scriptures had been read and properly made use of then it would have been much shorter and the Samaritan wouldn't have got a look in because the priest would have been the one to sort it all out.

The point was, though, that the very complex sets of rules and commandments that had been given through Moses and written down were not intended to be like cords that bound people hand and foot, they were in themselves gifts to the future of a community that was fragile and just getting going after its escape from slavery in Egypt and needed a framework around which to build a stable and mature and compassionate and just society. Something which was to include, as different commandments made clear, empathy and consequent compassionate action to support and help those who were, in one way or another, victims, whether they were part of the community or strangers living in their midst. All of these as our first reading reminded us, not something that was remote and far away but written in people's hearts, second nature.

That might sound quite straightforward but we know how easily scripture can become a tool of control and not a source of liberation, or thoughtful, reflective moral and spiritual development. It can be used to reinforce the command to think and act this

way, or else. And that has been a dimension of the history of the church since the beginning that has often distorted the kind of growth that could have taken place ever since the day when Jesus promised his followers that he would send the holy Spirit who would lead them into all truth.

Some years ago, working with students. I used a role play in which they had to split into two groups and take on the role of members of parliament at the time of the first attempts to abolish slavery. They had the bible as their resource and they had to prepare arguments for a parliamentary debate, which they then acted out, for and against the abolition of slavery. On each occasion, the students arguing to retain slavery won the debate, at least they were the ones with the most connected and lucid arguments.

You can imagine then, that when it came to discussing the exercise, the first question to be asked was, what just happened? For the students, as for us, the ingrained revulsion against the very idea of slavery is so strong as an expression of our faith that when we reflect on the practices of slavery in the past or instances of modern slavery we are appalled. But that was not always the case as we know. I gather that when the first attempt in parliament to ban slavery was defeated, church bells rang out in celebration! There has been an individual and cultural shift in our innate sense of what is right that has taken a very long time and is not yet complete.

The lawyer who asks Jesus the question, as Luke says, to test him, was perhaps someone who Jesus recognised as being at a tipping point in his own spiritual development. If he tips one way he falls into a box ticking way of understanding how eternal life is achieved but Jesus is inviting him to take the other way, the one that begins with empathy and the ability to respond with mercy, essentially to respond out of selfless love. That, Jesus is saying, is the path to Eternal Life and one of its characteristics, not the box ticking approach that, as the parable illustrates can erode the ability to be empathic and to act with love.

The lawyer also represents those who have leadership in the community and so we may perhaps think there is a rather contemporary application at this time in our country at least, if not everywhere in the world. As we reflect on who may come to lead and what their priorities should be we may wish to recommend, as well as pray of course, that those priorities should reflect the insights and values not just to be found in the parable of the Good Samaritan but in the whole of the gospels, not because there is some Christian entitlement to be in control, but because those values, ingrained into us as second nature, do indeed provide the framework for a prosperous, just and compassionate society. We might, perhaps, pray earnestly for old and some not so old dogs, to learn new tricks.

Amen