

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

→ Pulling together the themes of Remembrance Sunday and the parables of Jesus which is the section of the Essential Jesus programme that you'll reach this week, didn't necessarily feel as if it was going to be a particularly easy task! But then I read the very first of the parables that you'll be encouraged to read this week and recognised within that story a number of themes that, sadly, we hear of again and again in our news headlines every day.

..... The parable of the Good Samaritan that we've just heard again this morning is one of, if not the most well known parable that Jesus told. And sadly, the early part of the story which speaks of mugging and beating and stealing is a story that would fit very easily into the news headlines that we read or hear everyday of our lives in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. There's nothing new here and sadly the attitudes that are displayed by some of the characters in this story are attitudes which can escalate and develop into the full scale war and atrocity which we remember on this day and still witness in some parts of our world.

.....So, as we spend time today remembering those who have sacrificed much for us, what is there for us to learn from this particular parable that Jesus told and in particular from the attitudes and the actions of the characters within that story?

→ First of all let's think about the robbers who attacked the man who was seemingly simply making a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. They didn't simply knock him to one side in their haste to get past him. They didn't just give him a bit of a hiding for the fun of it. But they consciously beat him, stripped him of anything of value, including his clothes and left him on the side of the road, not even sure whether he was dead or alive. That's pretty calculated and callous behaviour, the like of which, thankfully, isn't seen amongst the majority of the human race, but when it does happen then it is headline news!

.....What made the thieves behave in that way? What attitude was uppermost in their hearts and their minds when they did what they did? Well, we can't be entirely sure, but the fact that they stripped this man and left him with absolutely nothing, suggests that it was perhaps a simple case of "we want what you've got" and we don't much care how we get it! Clothes, money, other valuables – whatever the man may have been carrying – it was taken by these people who valued things more than the valued people.

.....Some would say that this man was foolish to travel that road on his own. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was well known for being dangerous with its numerous sudden turnings and rocky terrain. People rarely travelled alone on that road and certainly not if they were carrying anything valuable, so there may be those who'd say that the man had no one but himself to blame for the situation in which he found himself.

.....But whether it was foolish or not, that surely doesn't excuse the behaviour of those that wounded him so badly does it? No, of course it doesn't! But sadly, that attitude of greed and coveting what other people have can escalate and bring about the kind of atrocities that we remember today. Coveting the power that others wield, or the oil supplies of another nation or the land of another people group; all these thoughts and others like them have driven people to declare war on others and resulted in dreadful heartache and agony for so many.

.....But it's not just physical actions that wound and harm is it? We may feel quite comfortable in the knowledge that we wouldn't get involved in that kind of physical harm

but so often there are far more subtle words or gestures that do untold harm in the lives of others. There probably aren't many of us that could honestly say that we've never wanted what someone else has got. We're envious of the abilities of others or the praise that others receive for their efforts. We covet someone else's job or home or car or exam results. And what do we do when that attitude gets a hold of our hearts? We speak ill of those people or their achievements. We try to make others believe that things aren't all that they seem or that they've got where they've got or what they've got by some questionable means. We strip them of their reputation and their status and their honour with our words! We harm them and wound them with our attitude. Oh, it may not result in war or violence but the barriers go up, peace is disturbed in our relationships and the lives of others are diminished when we allow the wrong attitudes to control our behaviour.

→ Now, let's think about the Priest and the Levite. What attitude did they display when they each, in their turn, walked by on the other side? The Priest noticed the man; the Levite even took the time to go and take a look at him, but both of them left the scene without attempting to do anything to help. Not as brutal in their actions as the thieves, but completely indifferent to the suffering that they could see before their very eyes and cold hearted enough to be able to walk away

.....It's easy to read that story and be disappointed by the actions of the Priest and the Levite isn't it? Why didn't they stop and do something? Surely they knew what they ought to do; they were religious men for goodness sake! But perhaps therein lies the problem. They're so concerned about getting to the Temple on time, or staying out of trouble themselves, or keeping the laws of cleanliness that they're not prepared to take time out, roll up their sleeves, and make a difference to this poor chap lying by the side of the road!

.....How could they? Wouldn't any decent citizen stop and help? Would you? Really? Isn't it a whole lot easier just to leave it to someone else sometimes? The homeless person in the doorway that we pretend not to see or throw a few coins at; the single parent with the unruly children that lives a few doors away from us that really needs some support but we don't bother to speak to her; our own children crying out for our attention when we're so busy with our work or our charitable responsibilities! Are we really any different from the Priest and the Levite when we ignore the needs of others that are right under our noses? We may know what we ought to do, but sometimes it just feels as if it's asking too much of us and it's so much easier to just hope that someone else will come along and take care of it.

.....But aren't these just the people that Jesus pursued; the people that Jesus spent time with? The needy, the battered, the hurting; the ones that didn't look right, or live right or smell right? He touched lepers, he encouraged the lonely, he spent time with those labelled "sinner" by others. I don't know how the Priest or the Levite explained their behaviour that day, but they certainly missed an opportunity to share the love of God and to make a difference in the life of that man who lay hurting. They may have thought about doing good, but they didn't do it. They may have recognised the problem, but they were indifferent to it.

→ So, Jesus finishes his story, his parable, by telling his listeners then and us today, how to behave when faced with the needs of others. Have you ever tried to imagine what may have gone through the Samaritan's mind when he saw this wounded and bleeding man by the road side? He may well have thought just like the Priest or the Levite at first and considered leaving him there for someone else to worry about? But even if he did think that, he eventually decided to do what he could to make a difference.

He bandaged wounds, he used what he had to ease the pain and he took the man to a safe place where he could rest and recover. And of course, it didn't stop there. He paid for his accommodation and offered to pay any other expenses that cropped up. He saw the need. He was moved with compassion and then he translated that care and compassion into positive action. He sacrificed his own time and resources for the sake of another.

.....What a range of characters and attitudes Jesus has packed into this story! The thieves are the takers; the ones whose greed and envy led them to take what didn't belong to them. The Priest and the Levite know what they should do and they may even talk about it and teach others to do it. But that's where it ends. They know about it, they talk about it, but they don't demonstrate the mercy and the care that is needed. And then there's the Good Samaritan; the one that showed kindness and compassion despite the danger or the risk of infection or the financial cost or the risk to his reputation.

→ There's a story told of a photographer who was working for a Christian magazine. The editor asked him to photograph someone that was living on the streets and eventually the photographer captured what he thought was the perfect picture. In a dark alley he spotted a beggar pleading for food just yards away from a grocery store that made its own bread. The photographer excitedly took the picture and rushed it to his editor who agreed that it was just what he was looking for. But having congratulated the photographer, the editor then asked him what help he had given to the beggar! The photographer looked a little uncomfortable and had to confess that he hadn't actually done anything. The editor then said, "Well, you may got the picture, but you didn't get the message!"

.....That's exactly what happened when Jesus spoke in parables. Some people listened and they recognised the picture that Jesus painted with his story, but they didn't always get the message. What about us today? Are we getting the message? Where do we fit into this story that Jesus told? Are we ever like the thieves, maybe not physically harming others but damaging them with our words and our attitudes? Or are we like the Priest or the Levite, full of good intentions, knowing what we ought to do but not often actually getting around to doing it. Or maybe we really have got the message and we're like that Good Samaritan, always ready to roll our sleeves up and get involved in the mess of other people's lives in order to share the love of Christ, bringing peace, harmony and compassion wherever we can.

.....That's what Jesus calls us to do so that whenever people find themselves in the place of the man lying by the side of the road, feeling somewhat battered by life and desperately in need of love and compassion, they can experience for themselves the love of God for them through us. Henry Ford once said, "You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do. You have to do it!" May we be the kind of people who not only know and understand what Jesus teaches us to be and do, but may we be people who put that into action every day so that the faith we speak of with our lips is authentically displayed in our lives. Jesus said, "You go then, and do the same."