

## **Sermon 14/7/2019**

**Some of you might be familiar with the Irish TV sitcom ‘Father Ted’, in which the eponymous character is a priest in a dead-end parish on a small island, saddled, among other vicissitudes, with a comically stupid young assistant called Father Dougal. The writers, Linnehan and Matthews, were good at getting laughs by pushing a concept deep into the territory of the absurd, and in one scene Ted and Dougal are looking out of the window while Ted holds a couple of plastic toy cows, and says ‘No, Dougal. These cows are very small, those cows are far away.’**

**Now, let me grasshopper away to a news story that came up while I was journalist in London, nearly fifteen years ago. The British Food Standards Agency had threatened to force makers of Stilton cheese, which most people only eat at Christmas, and even then very little, to reduce its salt content, which was considered to be dangerously high, thereby destroying its distinctive flavour, to the understandable outrage of the producers and their customers. Fortunately, the Government’s chief scientist at that time, a man with the glorious name of**

Andrew Wadge, sensibly observed of this and other cases that the content of a food is normally much less important for our health than the quantity in which we eat it. There is nothing wrong with having a seasonal treat. In other words, both consumers and regulators should be informed by a sense of proportion. So. Perspective and proportion. I want to keep those two principles in the background, while we take a closer look at this morning's readings.

The encounter Luke describes between Jesus and the lawyer in the tenth chapter of his Gospel is one in which both men are playing to the gallery. Jesus is by now something of a celebrity. According to Luke not just the Twelve, but fully another seventy of his followers have been out and about in the surrounding towns and villages, doing his work. There has even been some total stranger, some unknown freelance, casting out demons in his name, to the dismay of the Disciples. Jesus is news, and there seems to be no shortage of challengers, of Cathy Newmans and Andrew Neils, vying either to make a fool of him, or to trap him into some statement of blasphemy. Wherever he appears, now, he is a target for the braggart and the know-all to stand up and prove how

clever they are, and we can plausibly imagine crowds of onlookers, taking sides and even placing bets on who is going to come out on top.

This time it's a lawyer who decides to have a go, and, true to his trade, he sticks to the first principle of advocacy, which is never to ask a question unless you already know the answer. But in this case it backfires. When he asks, 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' he is no doubt hoping that Jesus will come up with some wacky new formula, so that he can tie this itinerant preacher and wonder-worker in knots with his superior knowledge of the law and the prophets. But Jesus isn't falling for that one. Effectively he says, 'You're the expert, you tell me', which forces the lawyer to give an answer, from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, that any diligent ten-year-old at the time could have produced without difficulty. So he feels a bit of a fool, and he tries again, probably pretending that his first question was just a softener before the killer punch; 'And who is my neighbour?'

Now if any of us were asked that question, we would be wise just to quote Luke 10: 25 - 37, rather than get

into the sort of argument that the lawyer is hoping for. He wants Jesus to say something like 'Anyone who is within reach, anyone who lives close by, anyone who needs your help,' because then he can go on the attack. 'Really? What if that person is unclean under the law? What if it's a Roman soldier? What if it's a criminal taking just punishment? Are you going to undermine due process by helping him? And what if it's the Sabbath?' Etc etc.

But that's not how it plays out. Instead, Jesus employs the device of the parable, and this is where it gets really interesting. For a start, the narrative is Judaeonormative, that is, everyone is assumed to be a regular Jew unless otherwise stated. We know this because while the victim of the robbers is described just as 'a man', his benefactor is described as 'a Samaritan'; not 'a member of a community hostile to his own' or 'someone of an alien race'. No. In telling the story of someone's kindness to a putative enemy, Jesus specifies that he is a Samaritan, which means that the man he helps has to be a Jew. This is important because it takes the story out of the abstract and grounds it in the reality of an inter-racial hostility with which all concerned - Jesus, the lawyer,

the idlers placing bets - are intimately familiar. Luke has already pushed that point home in his previous chapter, where he records that the disciples have been shunned by a Samaritan village. And since time immemorial we have described this parable as that of 'the *Good Samaritan*', as though it were normally a contradiction in terms, even though neither Luke, nor Jesus reported by Luke, uses that description. But that is how we modern Christian readers of Luke identify with the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews who are listening to this story, that's how we make ourselves part of their club, their tradition, just as they identify with this victim of violent robbery, and no doubt tut and shake their heads at the callous behaviour of the priest and the Levite who leave him to suffer. For these representatives of Jewish theocratic authority are also 'one of us', and so far Jesus is merely telling a compelling tale of those who should know better failing to honour God, just railing against pride and faithlessness among God's people, like any Old Testament prophet before him.

But then everything changes. Because suddenly it becomes clear that the victim, the *one of us*, is not the subject of the story. That distinction belongs to a

Samaritan, a hated other, the sort of stock caricature of the heathen whose role in an Old Testament narrative would normally have been either to be defeated as a reward for the righteousness of Israel, or to lay it waste as punishment for its sins. But here he, not the victim, is central to the narrative, not the *one of us* who has suffered injustice, but the *one of them* who has seen and taken the opportunity to honour God with his compassion.

That is, very obviously, what it means to be a neighbour, so the answer is close up and obvious. As Moses says in our other reading from Deuteronomy, 'It is not in heaven... neither is it beyond the sea... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.'

So, unsurprisingly, the lawyer comes a poor second in this contest. But I wonder what sort of lawyer he was. Would he today, perhaps, be one of those keen to represent a client who felt that they had been 'othered' - yes, apparently that is a word - by a colleague, or taken a dislike to some public display and decided that it had made them, personally, the victim of a 'hate crime'? Or would he be on the side of

order, jurisprudence and common sense? For it is no accident that it is here in the Judaeo-Christian West that we live on the front line against an advancing cultural chaos in which more and more pampered people, relative to most of the world, are taught to crave the romantic status of the victim, and that subjective definition is taking precedence over evidence and fact. It is the triumph of destructive solipsism, the me, myself, I of spiritual consumption, made vastly worse by the abuse of social media that can be accessed without engaging with reality, resulting in a billion sealed-up cells of self-obsession. Social media undermine our sense of perspective with the illusion of proximity, and our sense of proportion with routine, often anonymous over-reaction, untempered by the conventions of civilised discourse. Any questioning of a fashionable orthodoxy is met with a French Revolutionary chorus demanding some form of execution by public loathing that destroys any notion of scale or degree. And this is a big problem. Because we depend on perspective, proportion and definition to make sense of the world and our place in it. Without them we go mad, hopelessly lost in an incomprehensible Creation without distance or boundaries.

But it seems the peddlers of identitarian victimhood are not content with making us all live in a hall of bendy mirrors where we can't tell the very small from the far away, or too much from too many. As we know from the experience of too many universities and broadcasters and publications in the US, Canada and Britain, they are also intent on preventing the free expression of thought, lest any transgression be permitted, or spontaneously occur.

'In the beginning was the Word' says St John, and without verbal expression, thought itself withers and dies in a vacuum; indeed, in that Johannine conception that is the bedrock of our Christology, without expression, without the realisation of the innate, there would be... no... Creation. Well. By their fruits you shall know them, as Matthew has it.

Now, we are all of us trapped in the self. Our view of the world is necessarily one of concentric circles, because we see from one point inside our heads, outwards in all directions like a swivelling searchlight anchored to its base. We cannot see round corners, so neither can we see all the unintended damage we

have done. This means that we cannot truly repent, or be forgiven and reconciled with God; except through Christ, God made man, who, on the Cross, knew divine omniscience of all the sins of his human kind, and all their consequences, repented of them and was reconciled with the Father for us all. In him is our atonement; and in our communal worship of him, and in our efforts to look beyond ourselves to do his work, lie our liberation from the prison of the self.

That is the message of the parable of the Samaritan, as we should properly call it. We escape the obsession with self by engaging with the other. We achieve a transcendent perspective by seeing ourselves as others do, and by asking 'Who is my neighbour?' as well as 'Who's neighbour am I?' Above all we look around us and say to ourselves 'It's not about me'. Instead, we look to Christ, to the majesty and order of Creation, and know in our hearts that it's all about Him. Amen.