

Views from the Pews - The Samaritans

Who are they? A present day answer would likely point to the international charity which offers succour to the suicidal and others in mental or spiritual distress.

But in Luke 10, the term 'Samaritan' comes loaded with different – and critically important – meaning. Jesus is probably having to deal with a problem common to many religious and social groups, which we currently call 'othering'. Othering involves stereotyping those who are 'not quite like us' and is often deliberately used to define and hopefully unite a group. Regrettably, some modern-day groups which label themselves as 'Christian' or a 'Church' use this technique against people they perceive as a threat. Modern examples may include non-standard gender groupings, or Muslims, or those stereotyped as 'liberal'. The mainstream churches are not immune – see the centuries of conflict following the Reformation.

Jesus chooses a Samaritan for very good reason. Samaria, the northern half of the country under Roman occupation, is perceived as different from Judaea, and its inhabitants as 'not quite like us'. Biblical scholarship has the Jews looking down on the Samaritans as a way of coping with the pressures of superpower occupation. When we 'other' people who we describe as different, our first instinct is to limit our obligations to them. After all, they cannot be our neighbours, for they are essentially different from us.

Jesus confronts this head on. Note for instance that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho leads eastward, not northwards to Samaria. So Jesus' hero is already outside his rohe, isolated, and vulnerable to disparagement and judgementalism. He may well be classed as an 'immigrant', an 'alien', an 'illegal migrant'. All the words we use to make ourselves feel better, unique perhaps. Certainly superior. Jesus is having none of this. His priest and his Levite pass by on the other side. It is the Samaritan who stops to see if he can help.

Who then are our neighbours? The uncomfortable truth of Luke 10;36 and 37 is that our neighbours include not only villagers affected by the earthquake in Afghanistan, but the Taliban members who call for international help. Our neighbours include not only Ukrainians but Russians. A Church that has a full understanding of Jesus' lesson is well equipped to lead the debate about immigration. It is precisely because the issue is so complex that it must be guided by fundamental Christian principles. There can be no hierarchy of neighbours.

Luke's story ends on a doubly happy note. The mugging victim recovers in the inn, knowing the Samaritan will cover all his expenses. But the Lawyer, who had hoped to limit the definition of 'neighbour' leaves the encounter with a blessing. 'Go and do likewise'. A blessing certainly, but also a challenge.

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