

CCV Gd Samaritan, Lk 10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I love stories. I love reading stories, whether that's novels or history, which is simply true stories. It's of course the same word in German, *Geschichte*. I love watching stories in TV or films. Of course, I love listening to people's stories. It's been a privilege to get to know some of yours and I hope to get to know many more. The story Jesus told in the reading is of course perhaps his most famous.

The story begins with a legal debate. This lawyer asks Jesus "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's a great question. A question we all want to know the answer to. But Jesus is a good teacher and he turns the lawyer's question back on him.

V.26 "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

Jesus turns round to him and says, "Good question, what do YOU think?" The man replies with the right legal answer. He quotes some important verses from the Old Testament. He quotes two great commandments.

Verse 27.

Jesus says, well done, you've got the law right. "Do this and you will live."

But the lawyer's got a legal question. Who is my neighbour? What counts as a neighbour? After all this is where things get complicated. If there's two things you need to do to get eternal life, love God and love your neighbour, then a lot depends on who your neighbour is. In a sense loving God is easy. It's such a big idea it can very easily become diffuse, vague and shapeless and therefore in a sense quite easy to tick off the to-do list. Loving God isn't so much an extra task to fit into the day, it's rather an attitude, a way of life, an approach to all the things you're doing anyway. I could talk a lot about what that means and indeed in an 8:30 sermon a few months ago I did, but the focus in today's Bible passage is on loving your neighbour, which in some ways is harder, because he or she, unlike God, has very particular, very specific needs. You can love God in and by doing pretty well anything un sinful. So for a busy person, it's not an extra task to tick off the list. In that sense, it's almost easy.

But loving your neighbour is a bit different. Because your neighbour might well have specific needs, that you will want to meet if you love them. Those needs might well be specific things, at specific times, which will get very inconvenient, especially if you've a busy person. Your neighbour might be ill. Your neighbour might be ill at a particular time, when it is very inconvenient for you to look after them. Your neighbour might need to borrow something exactly when you need it and they might break it. Your neighbour might be lonely and be exactly the sort of person you don't like. There is a danger, especially for religious people, people like this lawyer, people like us, because we're here in church, that God is very conveniently general and our neighbour is very annoyingly specific and particular.

This lawyer decides to solve this problem in a legal way by narrowing down, who is my neighbour. If it's just my literal neighbours, the people who live in the next-door house or flat to me, that's not too difficult. Although they will have particular, specific needs at particular specific times, that will have to become items on my to-do list, there's only a limited number of them, because my house or flat is only has a limited number of external walls and therefore I can probably just about meet their needs most of the time, tick those things off my list and still have some time for myself. What's more, my literal, physical neighbours are probably going to be like me, because they live near me, and therefore they will probably be easy for me to talk to and they won't be much more needy than me.

If eternal life requires loving God, that's so vague, it's easy, so I can do that. Great, result! If eternal life means loving my neighbours, that's also fairly straightforward, as long as they're a limited number of people who are easy to relate to.

Except Jesus says no. Jesus tells this famous story to remind this man not to limit his definition of neighbour. He chooses to make the main character a Samaritan. The Samaritans were the sworn enemies of the Jews. There was major historical animosity between them. They did not get on, they were like any two fiercely warring ethnic groups today.

In this simple and well-known story, a man is injured by the road side and two Jewish religious leaders, a priest and a Levite, walk right past him on the other side of the road. But a Samaritan is also passing that way along the road, sees this man, stops, helps him, binds up his wounds and accommodates him in a local inn.

The turning point in the story is v.33.

Read.

The word “pity” sounds a bit patronising in English, a better translation is probably “compassion”. It’s a story about compassion. It ends in v.37 with the lawyer’s summary description of the Samaritan “the one who showed him mercy.” It’s a story about mercy, pity and compassion. That is what we are called to, if we want to inherit eternal life, and we are called to show it to the people who are least like us. The reason Jesus makes a Samaritan the main character is to broaden as far as possible the definition of neighbour.

Your neighbours are not only people like you. Your neighbours are not only people who are easy to look after. Because there are two ways this injured man is a decidedly unwelcome neighbour to the Samaritan. Firstly, he is different and, secondly, he is inconvenient.

He is different. As I’ve mentioned, Samaritans were the hated enemies of the Jews. An injured Jewish man is not someone a Samaritan wants to look after. The Samaritan was probably disgusted at the thought of having to touch this injured Jewish man. However he is his neighbour, so he loves him. He is his neighbour simply by being injured on the road, so he loves him.

I don’t know who the hated people in your life are. They might be people you disagree with particularly – fans of Donald Trump, or enemies of Donald Trump. They might be people you find it very hard to get on

with, because they speak a different language or come from a different culture. They might be people who've offended you in the past and you really don't want to see them again. They might be people who just bore you and whom you have nothing to say to. They are basically anyone who you are just desperate to avoid, who you would cross the street to avoid. Jesus challenges us and says these people are our neighbours and we are to love them. We are to cross the street to care for them.

This injured man is not only different, he is inconvenient. We can just picture the priest and the Levite in a hurry. It's not that they didn't care, it's that they had other things to do. Those other things no doubt involved loving God. No doubt they were very important and valuable. Maybe they involved loving other neighbours, who were more like them and more convenient.

Over the last couple of years, some of my routines have changed and I no longer visit regularly the supermarket near my house. I go to a different supermarket. This means I no longer regularly buy a copy of the street newspaper from the man who sells it outside. However, I do often see him, because I cycle past the supermarket on my way to work. But I fairly rarely stop and buy the paper, because that involves stopping my bike. It's on a down hill so I've got a nice speed going which I will lose if I stop. It involves crossing the road, getting my wallet out of my bag, buying the paper, crossing the road again and getting back on my bike. I'm ashamed to say I haven't been doing that, because it takes too long. Then, on Tuesday morning last week, after I'd been preparing this sermon on Monday morning, I realised how like the priest in the story I am. You see I bet this priest had very important things to do. I bet he was loving God. He probably had a very important sermon on the Good

Samaritan to prepare, at a very important Anglican church in Vienna. On Tuesday I brought the paper. It comes out every month. Ask me in August if I brought the August edition. A lot of us in this church are very busy and it is very tempting for us to try to limit our neighbours when we're busy. This passage is an encouragement to love our neighbours even when we don't like them and even when they're inconvenient.

A brief word on the political implications, because this is a passage politicians love to talk about. This passage is not a prescription for any public policy issue, whether it's road maintenance, welfare spending or immigration. It's about the virtue of compassion and virtues rarely translate directly into policy. However, I think it does challenge political rhetoric that appeals to fear and selfishness rather than compassion. I have no idea how many migrants a country like Austria should accept. I do know that our decision should be motivated by compassion, not fear.

Of course, this kind of compassion is very challenging and very hard work. That's why it's perhaps helpful to bear in mind how the early church read this story. For many famous Christian interpreters in church history, including Augustine, this is not just a story about how we love our neighbour, it's about how God loves us. We are called to identify with the injured man as well as the Samaritan, because the true Good Samaritan is Jesus. Jesus sees us, sees humanity in the ditch of sin and brokenness and suffering and comes to our rescue. He pays the price for us to stay somewhere safe until he comes back. He gives us security in a dangerous world when everyone else walked on by, perhaps when religious people walked on by. He is the least-expected, outcast Samaritan who gives us security and safety. Knowing how he has rescued

us when we were annoying and inconvenient can help us look to others
however annoying and inconvenient they may be.