

Matthew Chapter 25 Verses 31-46,

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'Motorists drive on by as Good Samaritan desperately tries to flag down help after finding an injured man.'

'Racist Pontypool man attacked 'Good Samaritan''

'Good Samaritan sisters are helping children in need'

If you do not use a computer or have never been on the internet, then I apologise for starting this written sermon in this way. If you put Good Samaritan into a search engine, then you bring up numerous news stories that use this term in headlines such as those above. I think that the term has become to mean acts of kindness to strangers or going out of your way to help someone. The phrase is used as though there is a choice that has been made to get involved in a situation, a choice which most people would not make. There is an underlying assumption in these headlines that most of us would not have done what the person in the story has done.

If you remember the Good Samaritan story in the gospel of Luke, the wealthy travellers and religious Jews ignored the injured person and passed him by. It was the person who was a social outcast in Jewish mainstream society, the Samaritan, who stopped and helped. In our modern language, he not only stopped and gave immediate first aid but he also ensured that the injured man received aftercare. The Samaritan really put himself out and gave long term help.

I think then that the term Samaritan has entered our modern world to mean someone who helps people who are in need of some kind immediate assistance and who they do not personally know, and where most of society would not get involved. It is extraordinary behaviour worthy of note because it is unexpected. The term suggests that there is no ongoing or long-term relationship once that immediate need is met.

I regularly buy the Big Issue from the lady seller whose pitch is in High Town by Church Lane. We have something in common as she comes from Birmingham and my wife Janine and I usually have a chat to her as co-exiles from there. I sometimes do not stop because I am in a hurry or do not have change to buy a magazine, and that brings on a feeling of guilt as I join the majority of people walking past who like me are trying to ignore her. The seller is treated as though they are not there and are invisible.

This week's gospel is not the passage from Luke though, but I think that it is good to contrast the teaching of Jesus here with his teaching as told by Luke. We have been following the gospel of Matthew the last few weeks in our Lectionary Readings, and Matthew is describing here the explanation of

Jesus of what God wishes his disciples to do after Jesus leaves them. Last week the reading was the Parable of the Talents, which shows that God wants us to do use in his service what he gives to us in our lives. Here Jesus goes on to show how God wants us to do this.

In this week's gospel, Jesus looks at the duty God places upon us to be like the Good Samaritan all the time. We are commanded by God to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is what underpins all the teachings of Jesus about how we should behave to others, and if we do not show this love in how we treat others then we fail to obey his command.

The headlines at the start were written because the expected normal behaviour was not shown by the 'Good Samaritan'. Their going to help someone was not what most people would expect. Jesus is turning these expectations through 180 degrees. He is saying that going to help should be what is expected, should be the new normal behaviour. The headlines should disappear and should be replaced by something like 'Samaritan fails to give first aid at a traffic accident.' Or 'Man walks past homeless beggar without stopping to help.' Acts of kindness cease to be remarkable.

Jesus says that when his Kingdom does come how we have lived, how we have tried to obey his commandment, will be looked at and there will be a judgement of how much we actually did love others. We will be sorted into those who did try and those who didn't. The sheep and the goats in the parable. Jesus says that if we ignore those who need help, who are in need, then we are ignoring Him. If we ignore Him, then there will be consequences. We will not be taken into his Kingdom with Him. We will be a goat. It's a hard message isn't it?

This is the reason why I tend to feel guilt when walking past the Big Issue seller. I know that I should stop and acknowledge her. I should help her by buying a magazine. By not doing so I am not obeying the commandment give me by Jesus.

Our God is a forgiving God though, and if we do admit that we should have acted differently, express our remorse and ask Him, then He will forgive. He knows that we are not perfect. Our understanding of how Jesus would want us to behave and trying to do that is the important thing but being forgiven when we fail should mean that we change in future. He wants us to try and be that Good Samaritan all the time, not just when we choose to play that part. He wants it to be normal behaviour for us.