

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

No part of scripture is so well known as this morning's gospel. Beverley Gatenta writes "what makes preaching on it so difficult is the fact that the good Samaritan has become a secularized saint. So the good Samaritan is identified with those who lend a hand and help with meals on wheels etc. Now it is good to lend a helping hand but that sort of secularized saint has little in common to the character in Jesus' story. Wrenching him out of his context and making him a symbol of doing good misses the sharp bite of the parable and helps us to avoid its shocking and threatening challenge."

A parable is meant to arouse the imagination in ways that cannot always be anticipated or as C.H.Dodd writes;" it leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

This parable was meant to shock the original hearers. Samaritans to Jewish people in first century Palestine were as unpopular as El Quaida and terrorists are in twenty first century Melbourne, London or New York. They really were outsiders of whom nothing good could be expected.

Perhaps another way of stirring our imagination is to hear a contemporary parable, which I have reframed from the time of the Vietnamese war to the current conflict in Iraq.

John Wentworth Robinson III was part of the US Army Reserve. The increasing casualty rate from the war in Iraq concerned his parents and they were really worried when he was called up to take part in the latest surge of military power in Iraq.

Of he went with his battalion to Baghdad –appropriately warned by his mother to avoid contact with dangerous situations, to read his bible and say his prayers each day. All went well for the first month and his parents started to fall into a false sense of security. Then to their horror they received a call from the US Defense Force telling them that John their son had been involved in a roadside bombing incident and had been wounded and was about to be repatriated back to a military hospital in the U>S when he was well enough to travel. Naturally they were anxious to see him and after several more weeks received a telegram that he was being sent to a military hospital in Boston some four hours away from their home.

A week later John Wentworth Robinson Senior answered the phone to discover his son on the line. Well I've arrived back in Boston. - not too bad. Don't bother coming up just yet for I should be home within three or four days.

“There’s just one thing Dad. Is it o.k. if my best friend Billy comes home with me. He was wounded in the same incident and he’s got no family. He has had such a bad time. The explosion took one of his arms and legs and the side of his face has been badly damaged.

Whenever difficulties arose with the family Mr Robinson Snr always said “I will hand you over to mum.”

Mum had been listening to the conversation and was already agitated at the thought of having a badly wounded and disfigured GI living with them for a long time. After her immediate comments to the son she said, “do you really think it wise to bring him here. It will be hard nursing him and as you get better he might be in the road. After all you have only known him a short time.”

John junior argued back vigorously. But Mum he is my best friend and he’s had a terrible time. He really looks a mess.

That finished it for mum. In that tone of voice that brooked no opposition she firmly said, “No you will thank me in the future. You wouldn’t want someone who looks like a freak in your home. You can go and see him in a nursing home which will be the best place for him.” I am going to cook your favourite roast dinner. No more arguments.”

After the call was terminated the parents spoke together. “We don’t want to collect any lame ducks said Dad. And Mother agreed. The next day they received a call from an army chaplain who told them that their son had somehow stolen a large quantity of drugs at the hospital and taken an overdose prior to his death. They were naturally overcome with grief. They flew to Boston and drove out to the military hospital to have one last visit with their dead son. They were taken into the mortuary and when his body was displayed they discovered to their horror that John had lost an arm and a leg in the bomb blast in Iraq and one side of his face was still badly marked and disfigured. John their son was also Billy.

“Who is my neighbour” Sometimes he belongs to your own family. Who is the good neighbour? The one who responds to human need even if it is the need of any from whom we are alienated or at war.

To ask who is my neighbour is to ask for a definition of the object and extent of love. Jesus question as to who proved himself to be the neighbour shifts the attention to the kind of person one is to be rather than to those who are or are not one’s neighbours.

The parents in my story were not able to love their neighbour and in their context destroyed the most precious thing in their family. Ultimately when we are unable to fulfill God’s law of love to God, ourselves and others we cease to be the persons we were intended to be by God.