

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

DEUTERONOMY 30 : 9 - 14

LUKE 10 : 25 - 37

We no longer live in the United Kingdom! Since the Brexit referendum vote, we live in the Disunited Kingdom, divided by increasingly bitter barriers of geography, class, age, and origin. Our mistrusted politicians are in disarray. Our economic future looks uncertain.

The demonic cocktail of political collapse and economic disaster gave the fascist Nazi Party its power in the Germany of the 1930's, when racial violence and hate crimes were seen and heard daily in the streets of cities, towns, and villages. Even churchgoers in Nazi Germany colluded with racist behaviour. If asked, '*Who is your neighbour?*' they might say, '*Anyone of good German stock, or any Christian, but not Jews, not Communists, not Muslims, and not Gays.*'

You might say to me, '*That was Nazi Germany, it could not happen here.*' I do not agree. Given the right political and economic circumstances, racist hatred and intolerance can develop and thrive anywhere. Indeed, history can provide us with many examples. Since the Brexit vote the number of reported incidents of racial violence and hate crimes is five times what it was before. There have been attacks on Mosques, Synagogues, and Polish shops. There have been nasty comments overheard in many public places.

The Brexit vote has revealed a large number of angry people, mistrustful of Government and the Establishment, far from London and the Southeast, with growing resentment about unemployment, social deprivation, and being ignored by the powers- that -be. Angry people always seek a Scapegoat, and suitable Scapegoats are the Establishment, the European Union, Immigrants in particular, and Strangers in general.

The Brexit vote has opened a Pandora's Box in our land, and a Demon has been released. The key question is exactly the one Jesus tackled in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: "*Who is my Neighbour ?*"

Before I discuss the Parable itself. I want to tell you about two experiments in child psychology which are relevant.

The first study gave 100 children 3 drawings of a birthday celebration. One drawing showed a child alone, but with a mountain of gifts to be opened.

Another drawing showed the child with a single present, but with food and drink, and family members. The third drawing showed the child with no gift at all, lots of food and drink, and lots of people as well as family. The 100 children were asked to choose their favourite drawing, and 70 of them chose the third one, indicating that our basic nature is to be sociable and to enjoy sharing with others.

The second study split a very happy school class of 40 into two groups of 20, so that even friends were separated into the two groups. One group was called the Reds and the other group the Blues. Over several weeks competitions were organised between the Reds and the Blues, with rewards for the winners. Also, lies were told to the Reds about the Blues, and lies were told to the Blues about the Reds. In the end, the Reds came to hate the Blues, and the Blues came to hate the Reds.

Then they started calling each other nasty names. Then they started being violent to each other. This indicates that when we identify ourselves in Tribes, then we can easily be manipulated into hating people who are not in our tribe.

Our reading from Deuteronomy emphasised that it is our duty to obey God and to love God with all our being. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus confirms that teaching but goes one step further : we must love our Neighbour too. But the big question remains, "*Who is my Neighbour?*" Should our definition of Neighbour be very broad, or very narrow? The Parable of the Good Samaritan gives us the answer.

Let's look together at the painting of the Parable by Francesco Bassano the Younger which I've provided. The wounded and robbed traveller is in the middle, being cared for by the Good Samaritan. But the other characters are visible in the background.

Off to the left and in a clump of trees are the robbers, the bad men, dividing what they have stolen. Off to the right, and in the distance are the so-called good men, the Priest and the Levite, who each had ignored the wounded traveller deliberately. They saw him but pretended not to see him.

In the eyes of society, the Priest and the Levite were regarded as Good men because they devoted themselves to their religious duties, in the way that our reading from Deuteronomy would endorse. However, in reality Priests and Levites were often in conflict with each other, divided by competing for ritual duties in the Temple at Jerusalem.

For Jesus, as he tells the Parable, religious people can be just as blind to true Goodness as bad people like the robbers. I'm sure, if we're honest, we can all understand the reactions of the Priest and the Levite as they hurry past this wounded traveller. *"This is a dangerous road, well-known for robberies with violence ; any delay puts me at risk! That man is probably a drunk, he's only got himself to blame! I'm late for my religious and ritual duties; I haven't got time for this! That man looks like a foreigner so he doesn't deserve my help!"*
And so on.

In street incidents we don't expect, it's easier not to get involved, perhaps safer not to get involved, and so we can quickly come up with good reasons why we should not get involved. *"Somebody else can help that person, rather than me! After all, I don't regard that person in trouble as my neighbour."*

But Jesus tells us that there are no restrictions on who is my Neighbour, and who is your Neighbour. Jesus tells us that when help and love and care are needed, we must respond to Friend and Stranger alike.

In the painting of the Good Samaritan story, the artist underscores the message in an unusual way. In the foreground alongside the wounded man and the Good Samaritan himself are two animals, a dog and a donkey. They represent two very different species of animal, two different tribes if you like. Yet they are staring lovingly at each other, indicating that no barrier, no division, exists between them.

In the time of Jesus, Jews hated Samaritans, and Samaritans hated Jews. The story of a Samaritan caring for a wounded Jew would have shocked the hearers of the Parable.

For the Parable is about bridging across the barriers which divide us. We are born to love, and not to hate each other, but our Tribalism gets in the way. Every other human being is our Neighbour, both Friend and Stranger, deserving our welcome and our care.

May we see strangers as neighbours. May our Government discern wisely how to bridge across the divisions in our Disunited Kingdom. May tribalism never plunge our country into the abyss of Fascism and Neo-nazism. These must be our prayers in these uncertain and dangerous times. **The Dean of Chester.**

