

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)  
10<sup>th</sup> July 2022

'How do I inherit eternal life?' the lawyer asks. The answer will not have surprised him: love God and love your neighbour – after all, loving God and loving your neighbour is how you are going to spend eternity, that is what you will be doing in the timeless 'now' of Heaven, so if you want to get to Heaven, why not start to do today what you will be doing then?

This is not enough for the lawyer. Anxious to justify himself (to prove that he knows his stuff) he wants some more clarity, he wants to point out a weakness here, because what Jesus has said doesn't answer all the questions. After all, how do we define neighbour (doesn't that sound just like a lawyer?) The lawyer is happy to love his neighbour, but he wants to be clear about who counts as a neighbour, who is in and who is out. How tightly can we tie down this definition, how many people can we get away with excluding from it?

Jesus responds to the question by telling a story, a story that will help the lawyer work out the answer for himself. It is, of course, a story that we all know very well. A man is robbed and left by the roadside, looking as if he is dead. A priest passes by, but rather than help the man he steers well clear of him. A Levite does the same – that is to say, someone who performs lesser roles in the Temple liturgy. The people who perform the liturgy of the Temple don't look good. They don't even check if the man is dead or alive. Whatever are they thinking? Well perhaps they are thinking 'He may be dead', because if he is dead and they touch him as they check, they will be unclean, and they will not be able to take part in the worship of the Temple. Perhaps they are not cruel, just anxious because touching this man might disrupt the worship of The Temple – they may be letting down the Temple worshippers and do not want to risk it. Perhaps they are in fact full of compassion but dare not take a chance; or perhaps they are just a bit confused and do not want to risk upsetting people: lets not judge them too harshly. The Samaritan is rather different. He is moved by compassion, and jumps into action. Compassion plus action makes for neighbourliness. Whatever the Priest and the Levite were, they were not neighbours. Even if they felt a twinge of compassion, there was no action. Neighbourliness requires connection, and the Samaritan is up for that where the other two are not. They deliberately avoid any connection with this man, for whatever reason (we are not told) so whatever else they may be, they are not neighbours.

Compassion plus action is what makes for being a neighbour, and neighbours establish connection. That is what this story tells us. Of course, if we choose to act as if every person is separate and unconnected, as if the actions of each are independent of every other, as if my life is my life and your life is your life and the two have nothing to do with each other, we will establish very few connections, and there will not be many neighbours. If we choose to live in a fantasy world of our own self-sufficiency, neighbours will be few and far between. Perhaps the real question behind this passage, then, is not: 'Do you love your neighbour?' but, instead: 'Do you make neighbours in the first place, do you establish some connectedness with the people around you?'

It is, of course, quite interesting to read this parable and ask ourselves which of the passers-by on the road I am most like. But it is also good to imagine it a little differently, and to imagine ourselves as the bundle lying by the road, battered and damaged, waiting for someone to pass. This is the human condition: to be waiting by the roadside, unable to save ourselves, waiting for Christ to pass by. In what form will he pass? Who will be his chosen instrument for our rescue? Again, this chips away at our fantasy of self-sufficiency. If we will not acknowledge our own need for help, we will not accept the neighbourliness of others, and if we do not accept the offer of neighbourliness from others, we will certainly not make that offer to other people ourselves. So, perhaps we can tie down the central question of this story a little more. Perhaps it is more like this:

Do you think you can manage everything on your own? Do you think that everything is fine with your life, and that anything that isn't you can resolve alone? Will you let other people be a neighbour to you? Will you be humble enough to let them see your wounds, and to help to heal them? Will you let Christ minister to you in the person of other people?

Will you, then, having allowed others to become neighbour to you, make neighbours of others? Will you acknowledge that we are all connected, and none of us lives and thrives alone? Will you allow compassion for other people to get into your heart, and will you then act (as the Samaritan did) on that compassion?

As with all the parables, this one repays some detailed thought – it is much deeper and more challenging than it looks at first sight. It is a parable about neighbours, and how compassion linked to action is what builds neighbourliness. It is a challenge to being a neighbour to other people, but first of all to allowing others to be neighbours to us, which we will only ever do first of all if we allow Christ to be a neighbour to us, letting him see our woundedness so that he can bind us up and heal us.