

The impossible hospitality of the Samaritan

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 10 July 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 5C

Colossians 1: 1-14; Luke 10: 25-37

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>. The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

Recently I was given a wonderful handmade doorstep. It was a gift from the main organiser of an event I spoke at in the Uniting Church's Pilgrim College in Melbourne (see my address)ⁱ and (Talitha's explanation)ⁱⁱ. We were marking the landmark first Australian university unit in Queer Theology, before the intensive which Penny and I were about to teach. As such, the doorstep was one fitting symbol of such developments, keeping open the possibilities of hearing the voice of God in contemporary culture, particularly in queer lives and spiritual experience, and enabling some of our collective old pain and exhaustions to leave and new joys and challenges to enter.

It is however but one doorstep among many created by my colleague during the world's longest COVID-19 lockdowns in Melbourne. For too many doors were closed at that time. Then and still now, she feels it is important to have practical symbols which keep alive horizons of hope and renew possibilities of life and relationship.

In that sense, it is also perhaps one fitting pointer both to our Gospel story and to the divine possibilities of Christian mission today. For, in a number of other ways, the parable of the so-called 'Good' Samaritan is actually quite impossible...

What do I mean by '*impossible*'? Well, let us first drop the word '*Good*', which has often become a conventional additional name to the parable. Juxtaposing '*Good*' with '*Samaritan*' does have some point, in that, understood in its original context, it can bring out something of the once scandalous nature of the story.

Yet the word '*good*' is not in the text itself, and today tends to conceal, rather than highlight, the shocking particularity of the Samaritan's marginal and challenging identity. For it helps make this story too much of a morality tale, losing so much of its original and continuing radical character. Indeed, the parable is almost too well-known.

Instead of turning much of our understanding of mission on its head, spinning us around, and leaving us seeking God afresh, it also risks consolidating unproductive patterns of missional life and thinking. Whenever we hear it, we need therefore to put a doorstep in our own perceptions and open ourselves to the text afresh.

It is very appropriate to do this this morning, both as we rejoice in having guests from the Australian Association of Mission Studies and also, as a congregation, we begin to reflect intentionally on our own mission futures, 'impossibly' dreaming with God. Let us look at three of the challenging impossibilities.

Firstly, there is the pretty clear impossibility of this story ever having been told by Jesus themselves, at least in any form resembling the text we have. The reasons include style and vocabulary as well as emphasis. Like other stories in Luke, many of which are the best known, its character is markedly different from Mark and Matthew's parables.

Now, of course, Luke may have had access to other memories of Jesus. Yet this story bears clear marks of similarity with other creative stories in Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. For the parable seems to be a Lukan Midrash, a commentary on the Hebrew scripture. Here Luke appears to have adopted significant words and ideas from 2 Chronicles 28.14ff, where Samaritan leaders intervene to save captives after battle. As that text expresses it, in terms with clear resonance to Luke chapter 10: the Samaritans:

'clothed all that were naked... anointed them... and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk in Jericho.'

This does not mean the parable does not reflect the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ. However, it draws attention to how theological communication, and mission, are not simply delivered to pass on. We should be aware that whatever we say about God is shaped by our cultural contexts, and that the very act of passing on the Gospel, is a work of human creativity, prompted by God. This means that it needs continual attention and renewal, lest we miss the mark by efforts at mere repetition or unknowing occlusion.

For, secondly, there is the impossibility of this story being welcomed by everyone in our society today, particularly some members of the Jewish Faith. Indeed, one of the theological reasons that this story was very unlikely to have come directly from Jesus, is what appears within it to be a distancing from Jesus' own Judean religious context.

As Jewish commentators have observed, this parable highlights the process of the creation of a binary distinction between what would become Christianity - and Judaism, reflecting tensions between love and law, development and tradition, Gentile and Jew. Luke's purpose was clear, as declared at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. That book, and his Gospel, had a key missional purpose in sharing the still fledgling Christian Faith with Gentiles, not least Romans.

Instead of the intense focus on the mission of Jesus within his own Judean context, Luke therefore emphasises Jesus' involvement with Gentiles. Luke thus helps create a different concept and patterns of mission from other Gospels, above all, from Mark. Indeed, with Luke-Acts, we see the development of Christian ideas of a missional 'salvation history', in which particular ideas of linear continuity and progress feature large, as well as association with secular powers. Taken up, particularly in Western thinking, we can thus see potential seeds of Christian imperialism and triumphalist notions of the irresistibility of the Gospel in all cultures.

Some Jewish voices have rightly, therefore, asked us to reflect upon unthinking use of this parable: not over-emphasising the Samaritan as ethically 'good' and 'holy', in contrast to what they perceive as the potentially, and sometimes real, over-denigration of the priest and the Levite, representations of the Jewish heritage.

As one Jewish professor has put it, recognising that the parable says more about Luke and his early Christian community than Jesus, a fellow Jew:

Here is a text which causes us pain and suffering, as it has for two thousand years. If Christians are committed to the values of mercy and compassion, let them reject the parable itself. ⁱⁱⁱ

Other recent biblical scholarship ^{iv} has also warned against framing this parable in too strong terms of Samaritan against Jewish ethnic or religious difference. Instead, we do better to read the Samaritan, together with the priest and Levite in the story, as figures to regulate the proper behaviour of all, whether Christian or Jewish. This fits with the likely original conversation between Jesus and the lawyer, which is more of a shared exploration of the meaning of the law rather than a break from it. For the vital issue is not so much the moral status of any particular type of person in the story, as it is the nature of divine hospitality.

This brings us, thirdly, to the greatest challenge: namely the impossibility of the radical hospitality we typically draw from the story. The idea of hospitality as central to Christian mission has certainly become quite influential recently, whether through such writers as Emma Juste or Henri Nouwen ^v, or as part of the generally well-intentioned attempts to create 'safe' or 'inclusive' Church spaces for hitherto marginalised people, sometimes when they are seen as modern-day Samaritans.

Yet, as thinkers like Derrida and Caputo have outlined, pure hospitality extended to everyone as gift is not attainable. ^{vi} For openness to all involves both the possibilities of conflicting needs and the risk of violence occurring. We have experienced this here in Pitt Street as the limits of our aspirations to 'welcome' all have been tested. For attempts at authentic hospitality, or total neighbourliness, is indeed '*a huge risk, a gamble in the face of tremendous odds*'. ^{vii}

Where then, do the impossibilities of the parable of the Samaritan leave us? Well, I would suggest they do not undermine Christian Faith and mission, but rather set them in a better light and with a greater divine focus. As with other beloved biblical texts, deconstruction breaks open the Gospel afresh, leading to genuine holy possibilities of grace and the Holy Spirit.

Firstly, the recognition of Luke's manifestly creative work of Midrash should not discourage us, unless we feel we can only be bound by Jesus' words. Rather this should encourage us to tell new stories, in new ways, of the subversive love and surprising grace of God among us. Prompted by the Holy Spirit in our lives and contexts, what then do we say of the faith in us, and how will we express it? In doing so, we will also be cognisant of others, including our Jewish siblings, and their own deep understandings and experiences of divine mercy and compassion.

Secondly, aware of the limitations of many dominant received interpretations, we might look at Luke's parable afresh, centring not so much on the Samaritan but on each of the figures in the story. In doing so, we might move away from treating it as a morality tale, and rediscover its wider theological challenges and missional gifts. The reality is that, typically, each of us, and together, are all of the characters in Luke's story, not just the Samaritan. Recognising this can help set us free and set free our mission, God's mission, including the divine mission in and to ourselves.

Thirdly, the impossibility of realising radical hospitality should bring us to humility, which I suspect was one of the original purposes of Luke's story. It is not so much that hospitality for all should not be part of our horizon of faith and mission, but that this must always be centred in God.

Significantly, in their use of the parable, hymns and prayers in the Orthodox traditions have usually placed emphasis not on the Samaritan as a model for our lives, but on seeing ourselves as the person who was beaten up and left for dead. Rather than assuming the place of God, the only real giver of grace, we are encouraged to ask for God's grace and recognise where that is already happening.

Over-egging ethics surely leads to anxiety, undue intensity and ultimate failure. For we can no more save others alone, never mind the planet, than we can save ourselves. We only distance ourselves further from God and God's surprising grace. Mission after all is not ours but God's. God is already out there, as he/she/they is here, and our job is to catch up, beginning this morning with prayer and worship.

During my time in Melbourne recently, I was struck, as in Sydney, by the return of rough sleepers to our city streets. Their presence raises many questions, resonating with Luke's parable. How are we to regard the passing by on the other side of so many people? How are we to respond to the requests for money, made directly at times to diners in pavement cafes in Lygon Street as they eat comparatively expensive meals? How do we relate?

One way forward is to take on the role of the Samaritan, 'Good' or clumsy or otherwise. Perhaps, however, our story this morning challenges us to greater humility, seeing life afresh. For what if God is not so much in the Church - and those who profess God's name, in whatever faith or creed - but in the stranger coming to us? What if God does not so much require us to go out as missionaries, but to receive the life and mission of the 'Other' sent to us? What if we spent less time pondering our own mission, and more time catching up to where God is already present in and beyond ourselves?

I wonder whether the renewal of faith and mission is not linked to a deepening of contemplative practice rather than more ethical agitation. For the strongest image of my recent stay in Melbourne was of an older female rough sleeper on Lygon Street. Wrapped up against the Victorian winter cold with a range of oddly assorted garments, she camped by the door of one of the most famous Italian restaurants. Plenty of folk passed her by, with the occasional person acknowledging her, or, sometimes offering a kindly word, or, just once in a while, a coin.

Yet it was not the passing by, or the occasional, and partial, recognition of God in her that struck me, but her own giving and generosity. Four little children came up to her at one point, and offered her some coins. She thanked them warmly, but gave them back for the children to use, and then began to tell them a story and entertain them. The children loved it - as they should - for they had found themselves receiving divine love in an unexpected place and person: God alive on the streets of Melbourne.

That rough sleeper was like the Samaritan in Luke's story: a doorstep for discerning faith and mission, prising open the possibilities of God's love and incarnation: divine love in the unexpected and marginal. Note well, the doorstep, like the parable and the Samaritan, are not the door. That, as John's Gospel says, is Christ. However, without parables, and parabolic living and contemplation, doors close, and neither God nor we can pass through.

May we, therefore, as the University of Melbourne's current advertisement has it, redefine possible: renewing the impossible, and learning to be impossible, in the love and grace of our impossible God.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.blessedimp.org/blog/changing-the-game-where-next-for-queer-australian-people-of-faith>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.blessedimp.org/blog/opening-doors>

ⁱⁱⁱ Steven Leonard Jacobs (then Aaron Aronov Chair of Judaic Studies in the University of Alabama) 'Toward the Construction of a Post-*Shoah* Interfaith Dialogical Universal Ethic' in *Zygon*, vol 38, no.3 (sept 2003) pp.736-742

^{iv} eg Matthew Chalmers 'Rethinking Luke 10: The Parable of the Good Samaritan Israelite' in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (2020) 139 (3), 543-566

^v cf. Emma Juste *Hearing Beyond the Words: How to Become a Listening Pastor* (2006) and H.Nouwen *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (1975/1996)

^{vi} For a summary, see John Blevins 'Hospitality is a Queer Thing' in *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* vol 19. No.2 pp.102-117

^{vii} *Ibid* p.116