



GRAY'S
INN

Sunday 16th May 2021
(Sunday after the Ascension)

The 2021 Mulligan Sermon 2021
The Rt Revd Stephen Conway, Bishop of Ely

Lev 9:9-18; Luke 10:25

It is a pleasure and privilege to be here. Thank you for inviting me. I begin by quoting the lead character in the 2001 film, *Legally Blond*¹. In her graduation speech she quotes Aristotle saying that “the law is reason free from passion”. She continues, but “I have come to find that passion is a key ingredient to the study and practice of law”. Going back further, my understanding having once been an historian, is that the twelfth century was a decisive time for the flowering of the rule of law in England. The *Laws of Henry I*² highlight that it is the emotional bonds between litigants that create peace. Love and friendship appear to supersede judgement. I have become fascinated by the life and writings of S Francis de Sales. At the height of religious conflict in western Europe at the turn of the seventeenth century, he said that no one was ever saved except by charity or kindness. I am also drawn to him because he was tall, bald and fat!

And so to the Mulligan Sermon which invites reflection on a reflection. Jesus tells the Parable of Good Samaritan in answer to a request for legal clarification. It is easy to jump straight to the scenario he outlines, without consideration of the conversation

¹ *Legally Blond* (2001), starring Reese Witherspoon

² *Leges Henrici Primi* (c. 1115)

that gives rise to it. The lawyer is seeking to test Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Instead of answering the question, Jesus points the lawyer back to the Law. “What is written in the law? How readest thou?”.

This particular aspect of the context of the parable is significant for the interpretive tradition around this text on which I want to draw in the next few minutes.

The lawyer answers Jesus’ question quoting the great *Shema* of Israel, the summary of the totality of the law given in Deuteronomy 6, to be bound as a sign on the hand, an emblem on the forehead, written on the doorposts and gates of the house. “thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy might.” (Deut 6:5) To which he then adds from the Levitical Holiness Code as we heard in the first lesson “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” (Lev. 19:18). The Law, then, in its Godward intent and human demonstration, is summed up in love.

The lawyer knows the answer to the question he is posing as a test to Jesus. He knows the Law and what he reads there – familiar with it in both broad scope and fine detail – but pushes his point further. I am to my love my neighbour as myself? Who, then, is my neighbour? Where are the limits of the love I am supposed to show?

And so Jesus tells the parable about the unfortunate man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and in so doing fell among the thieves who beat, stripped, and left him for dead. We know the story well, of the priest and Levite who hurry on by on the other side of the road, and of the Samaritan who comes to his aid, going out of his way to do so. And so Jesus asks “Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him who fell among the thieves?”, and the lawyer replies “He that showed mercy on him.”

We see here something of what it means to be a neighbour. In a 2018 collection of essays edited by Sam Wells and Richard Carter from St Martin's-in-the-Fields, and entitled *Who is my neighbour? The Global and Personal Challenge*, Rowan Williams comments as follows in his contribution to that volume:

Why didn't Jesus give [the lawyer] a clearer answer? Why didn't he simply say 'everybody' and leave it at that. The story of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus tells in response to that question, is a story not just about who we're supposed to love – it's a story about how we become lovable.

He goes on to observe that "part of Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question is that we are invited to define ourselves as neighbours."³ During the last Intafada in the West Bank, I was talking with an Orthodox archbishop about Christian unity in Jerusalem and the other holy places in Israel-Palestine. He said that there 57 varieties of Christian in the Holy Land. They got on well together by never discussing theology and by uniting in their support of the Grand Mufti of the Muslims in demanding a home and peace and justice for all. They had faced the question, who is my neighbour?

When we read this parable, we typically interpret it as a piece of ethical teaching: the lawyer asks who ought to be included within the category of "the neighbour I am bound to love", and Jesus tells a story that suggests that everyone, particularly everyone in need, is the neighbour I am bound to love. Go and do thou likewise, he tells the lawyer. That, however, is not primarily how the Early Church Fathers read this parable, and that ancient reading is suggestive of an answer to the question about how we define ourselves as neighbours. In that reading, we are invited not to consider ourselves as the Samaritan (or even, if we're honest, frequently as the priest

³ R. Williams 'The ethics of global relationships' in R. Carter and S. Wells (eds) *Who is my neighbour? The global and personal challenge* (London, 2018), 15.

or the Levite), but as the helpless victim, left in need of rescue. The Samaritan becomes a type for Christ, bringing healing and salvation, where law and religious observance had not helped. Christ is the neighbour who draws near; the demand to love one's neighbour is thus founded in the realisation that we are each in need of help. We might most obviously turn here to John Donne, sometime of another Inn of Court, and his oft-quoted reminder that "No man is an island entire of himself, but every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."⁴

Neighbourliness is not limited to polite nods over the fence, remembering to put the bins out and refraining from playing music too loudly, while remaining benignly indifferent to the other; rather, to be a neighbour is to recognise the multiple ways in which we are bound together in mutual dependence and obligation. That is what those Christians had learned in Jerusalem. And how much have we learned that over the last year? Not only did we learn it with the flowering of community spirit in the first lockdown, as people suddenly found themselves dependant on, or supporting, near geographical neighbours whom they had never before really met, we are seeing it too now, and with what may yet be long after-effects.

We are seeing it in the ways in which absence from school and play has hindered young children's speech and language development, and how their growth in confidence and character has been limited by the shrinking of their worlds to their own immediate families.⁵ We are seeing it in the acute anxiety among people of all ages brought on by new and unfamiliar experiences of extended isolation. The Samaritan is neighbour to the man who fell among thieves by showing him mercy, by coming close and binding up the man's wounds. That he shows mercy is not some uninvolved charity, dropping 50p in a tin for a good cause, but is loving-kindness – what in the Old Testament is the *hesed* of God for his covenant people. Mercy

⁴ Donne, 'Meditation 13'

⁵ Educational Endowment Foundation research reported by BBC 27 April 2021

always has an impact that is both external and internal; the ability to show mercy comes from having received it. It makes the reception of mercy complete. Love for God, for neighbour, for self. To be a neighbour is to be in relationship, with both our closest friends or family, and also with the surprising stranger who tells us something of who we really are and what it means to love, to be loved, and to be lovable. To quote Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*:

*But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*⁶

So Jesus says to the scribe, - Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him who fell among the thieves?

- He that showed mercy on him.
- Go, and do thou likewise.

Go, and do thou likewise. As an undergraduate I went for several auditions for student productions. After a poorer audition than usual I got a part as a nineteenth century resurrectionist in an adaptation of a radio play by Dylan Thomas⁷. I only began to understand why I had won the part when I read Dylan Thomas's notes about the characters. My character was tall and corpse pale with jerky inconsequent gestures. I have felt hurt and excluded ever since! Love is acted and enacted, not merely felt. What is written in the Law, what we read there, is that we are to love our neighbours as ourselves. We know, however, that therein lies part of the

⁶ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I

⁷ *The Doctor and the Devils*, an unperformed screenplay by Dylan Thomas first published in 1953.

difficulty: we may feel disinclined, completely unable, to love the other unconditionally in part because it can be so difficult really to love ourselves, and to know that we are loved and lovable. This can be the result of complex and painful histories, relationships that have gone wrong, mistakes we have made, or our own feelings of failure. We can all too easily identify with the man who fell among robbers, and then find ourselves engaged in self-directed victim-blaming – what on earth was he doing travelling down that road on his own? Didn't he know that it was dangerous? Even when we find it difficult to love either other or self (let alone God!), we can will to act in ways which demonstrate unconditional generosity or the possibility of forgiveness. We can do that as individuals, as institutions, and as society so that the love and justice we want to see becomes true in practice. This is how character – spiritual, social, and emotional – is formed. It is also part of the right purpose of good law in any dispensation.

We might think here of the famous exchange between Sir Thomas More and his future son-in-law William Roper in Robert Bolt's 1966 play *A Man for All Seasons*. Roper is impatient with the law, and More upbraids him for this:

William Roper: So, now you give the Devil the benefit of law!

Sir Thomas More: Yes! What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?

Roper: Yes, I'd cut down every law in England to do that!

More: Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned 'round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast, Man's laws, not God's! And if you cut them down, and you're just the man to do it, do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake!⁸

⁸ Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, Act 1.

Law is there not only to prevent and punish bad behaviour, but also to model and promote the good of all who are bound by it. It provides structure to our neighbourliness, and defines the nature and limits of different kinds of both freedom and obligation. Those elected to oversee this Inn of Court exercise a supple kind of authority which is respected by benchers, because all are under the same rule, as in a Benedictine monastery. We know only too well how dangerous it is when people, particularly those who wield power and influence, behave as though they are not bound by the same law as everyone else. Then our sense of common obligation and purpose is cast into doubt, the very idea that underpins neighbourliness and duty is eroded. By contrast, in the virtuous spiral of giving and receiving mercy, of being a neighbourly neighbour, love is grown. We become more who we truly are, and the multiple levels of our connection with one another are deepened and enriched.

A friend of mine was a government lawyer who specialised in the drafting of good legislation and statutory instruments. One of the highlights of her career was assisting an MP who had won the draw for private members' motions to prepare the bill, which was to have government support, to improve the rights of private tenants to decent housing conditions. In telling the parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to the lawyer's questioning, Jesus deliberately declines to provide a simple or catch-all answer. They both know what the Law says and what is written in it, and they engage in a conversation about how to understand and interpret it. Like my lawyer friend's neighbourliness, the parable moves us from principle to practice, whether globally, legally or locally – go and do thou likewise; go and be the neighbour in someone else's need – try even to be a good one; go and allow yourself to be healed and changed by a surprising stranger. Go and put into practice the law of love which roots and grounds us, for the sake of him whose love is our law. **Amen.**