

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbour to the man attacked by robbers?” “The one who treated him with compassion”, the lawyer replied. Jesus said to him: “Then go and do the same.”

Luke 10, 25-37



The parable we hear in today’s gospel has had such an impact on the whole of humanity that the words “Samaritan” and “good Samaritan” have become part of countless languages and cultures which use them to describe anyone who readily gives help to another person in distress. In many English-speaking countries you’ll find “Samaritans” listed as a registered charity to provide counselling and assistance to people in distress and at risk of suicide. In Australia we have that wonderful congregation of women religious known as “The Good Samaritans” or affectionately as “The Good Sams”.

This parable operates at multiple levels, and preachers have frequently asked us to consider which character in the story we most identify with. Before pursuing that line, let me share with you a story that was broadcast on some of our TV news networks in April this year. It emanated out of New York and was recorded in *The New York Post* in this way:

“A heroic homeless man, stabbed after saving a Queens woman from a knife-wielding attacker, lay dying in a pool of blood for more than an hour as nearly 25 people indifferently strolled past him, a shocking surveillance video obtained by *The Post* reveals. Some of the passers-by paused to stare at Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax last Sunday morning and others leaned down to look at his face. He had jumped to the aid of a woman attacked on 144th Street at 88th Road in Jamaica at 5.40 a.m., was stabbed several times in the chest and collapsed as he chased his assailant. In the wake of the bloodshed, a man came out of a nearby building and chillingly took a cellphone photo of the victim before leaving. Later, another man stopped, leaned over and vigorously shook Tale-Yax’s body. After lifting the victim’s head and body to reveal a pool of blood, he also walked off. Not until some 15 minutes after he was shaken by the pedestrian - more than an hour and 20 minutes after the victim collapsed - did firefighters finally arrive and discover that Tale-Yax, 31, had died. ‘That’s unacceptable,’ said a woman who lives in the building near where Tale-Yax was killed. ‘How can you be so heartless? If he’s dying, he might have been saved. If you don’t want to get involved, call 911 and leave.’”

The New York Post, April 24, 2010

Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax was an immigrant from Guatemala who found it impossible to get work in the current economic climate. He had nowhere to live and spent most nights sleeping in public parks. The woman he saved has not come forward and his assailant has not been apprehended. This story and the parable in today’s gospel are a reminder to us that we are sometimes victim, sometimes Samaritan and sometimes, sadly, among those who don’t want to get involved. Jesus leaves us in no doubt that we are always neighbour to others and that, if we are his genuine disciples, we can find no justification and no excuse for walking away from others in need.

Now put yourself in the place of the man in the parable who was beaten and robbed. Remember that he was a Jew and that all Samaritans were regarded by Jews as utterly despicable. And the Samaritans reciprocated in kind. The modern-day equivalent of what the Samaritan in the parable did for the Jew in the ditch would be having a Taliban freedom-fighter pick up a wounded American soldier and nursing him back to health or a member of the Hezbollah provide safe passage for a lost Israeli citizen. If you were the victim of robbery and violence is there anyone whose help would make you very uncomfortable?

Pondering a question like this nudges us to explore the prejudices to which we cling - prejudices based on race, religion, social status, cultural custom, dress & grooming, educational achievement, place of residence and the like.

We are not told whether the victim in today's parable resented the fact that he was rescued by, of all people, a Samaritan. However, there is no doubt that he would have had to let go of deep-seated prejudice to accept both his rescuer and the care that rescuer extended to him. That's the kind of conversion we all have to allow ourselves to undergo if we are to grow to the point of treating everyone we meet as neighbour and reaching out to all as brother or sister. Reaching out to a neighbour in need, even one whom we don't find particularly attractive, might well cause us some degree of discomfort, embarrassment or inconvenience. However, today's gospel clearly says that the only really effective way of responding to the challenge of today's first reading and choosing life is to pursue our love of God through love of neighbour.