

Homily for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 Year C

Today's Gospel is the very familiar story of the Good Samaritan, and I think that Jesus is teaching us two very important lessons in it.

The first lesson is obvious, the obligation to love and care for each other, especially the vulnerable and those in need.

The second lesson is not so obvious, but perhaps it is just as important.

Jesus did not just choose any old character to illustrate His story, He chose a Samaritan.

Why did He choose a Samaritan? What is so special about them?

It is a long story, but by the time of Jesus you did not mix with a Samaritan, because there were deep religious and political differences.

After the Israelites had crossed over and settled in the promised land, the land of Canaan, those in the northern part of the Kingdom of Israel gradually began to adopt the customs and religious practise of the Canaanites, whereas those in the southern part clung fiercely to the worship and tradition of their forefathers, centred in Jerusalem. The Kingdom broke into 2, the northern part becoming Samaria and the southern part Judah.

At the death of King Solomon in 922 BC, the rift had deepened and the North broke completely away from the South.

In 722 BC the northern Kingdom was invaded by the Assyrians, who deported the Israelites into exile, and then imported pagan people from Babylon to fill up the land and cities of Samaria.

These new people agreed to continue to worship Yahweh as the God of the land but wanted to continue to worship their own gods as well as including customs such as sacred prostitution.

So, by Jesus' time a Samaritan was considered to be the lowest of the low.

Therefore, Jesus was being very radical to introduce the idea of a Good Samaritan to His Jewish listeners and contrast that goodness, to the indifference of the priest and the Levite of the Jewish faith, who passed by on the other side for ritual religious reasons.

The point that that story makes is how very wrong we can be in labelling people and in believing that label sums up the richness and complexity of that person's character, "Oh, he or she is a Samaritan. Forget it, have nothing more to do with them".

Even Jesus himself suffered from this labelling when some of His listeners said, "Can anything good ever come out of Nazareth?"

Now we cannot completely escape from the habit of labelling. It is a sort of shorthand way we use to tell us something about each other. It can tell us where a person comes from. For example, he is English, or she is Irish.

It can tell us about their religious belief, he is a Catholic, she is a Methodist, he is a Jew, or she is a Muslim. It can tell us about their political beliefs, he is Labour, or she is a Conservative.

It can tell us about their psychological makeup, he is gay, she is heterosexual, he is bisexual and so on.

The trouble with our labels is that we do not just leave it at that, as a straight-forward description of a fact about a person, but we often take it one step further and use the same label to make a moral judgement about a person. And it is usually a negative one, one of criticism or disapproval. For example, he is gay, she is black, he is a Communist, she is from the East End, he is from Pakistan, or she is working-class. And that is our big mistake, because whilst it might be justifiable and with good reason not to like or trust a particular individual who comes from the East End, or Pakistan, or is working-class or is gay, we should not extend that same dislike, mistrust or criticism to all people who come from those areas. That is irrational nonsense.

Heaven help you if you are actually a Pakistani, who lives in the East End, is working-class and is gay, you would have no hope at all.

Labelling and the universal moral judgement that might go with it is a form of intellectual laziness and prejudice because there is no way that one descriptive word can sum the rich complexity and potential that there is in every human heart.

What Christ was saying was that if there were bad people in Samaria, then there were also most certainly good people in Samaria as well. It is the business of the followers of Christ, not to just act with loving kindness and compassion, but to look for and draw out those same qualities that lie in every human heart, sometimes very deep in the human heart.

There may be all sorts of reasons why people do not always act and live to the fullest and the best of their capacity.

All of us need to experience and receive the love and kindness from others in our lives, but it is also fundamentally true that we also need to express love and kindness to others. But sadly, so many things can block that instinct or can get in the way, simple things like shyness, lack of confidence, vulnerability, or even fear.

It is an act of love and kindness toward others to encourage and enable them to express the love and kindness that is within their own hearts.

We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that there are a lot of bad things happening in the world today, and that there are bad people around us. But just as in Christ's time, where there was real goodness in the people who lived in Samaria, so too not all Serbs or Bosnians are bad, not all Iranians or Iraqis are bad, not all gays or black people are bad, and not all atheists are bad.

If we do not believe and understand that, then that can only lead to a universal sense of cynicism and despair. The present world that we live in cannot hope to survive, with all the terrible pressures and stresses placed upon it unless people recapture a universal sense of optimism and hope.

As followers of Christ, we must not only be good to each other, we must also try to see the goodness that lives in each other, and, in seeing it, do all that we can to let it grow and flourish.