

Not as Bad as Them (Luke 10:25-37)

10:00am Holy Communion – 13th July 2025

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Who is the worst person you can think of? Adolf Hitler?

Recently I came across a new publication called *'The Age of Hitler'*, by historian Alex Ryrie. **His book develops the argument that our moral compass, in the modern western world, is no longer set in comparison to the best exemplars of our time or history, but rather the worst of our failures.** I think he has a point, but why? Well, to some extent it's a matter of *comfort*.

To be elevated in virtue above the most diabolical megalomaniac is to have at least *something* good to be said about you. *'It could be worse'* we say, *'I'm not as bad as all that'*, and on that low bar you can leave your list of personal virtues with no better qualification than at least you are not a genocidal maniac. It's not a very exclusive club though – according to Ryrie it's where most people end up.

It may be quite reasonable to say that you and I are not *essentially* bad people, so no great moral effort is required from us. Being not bad is quite easy to attain, so you could leave it there. **But what if that attitude conglomerates into a social picture that consists of us all orienting ourselves with regards to the worst of humanity?** What do you get if you observe a population that knows only its lowest common denominator? Just take a look at the standard media approach of creating villains, looking for trouble, or just generally looking for the bad news in everything. *'At least it's not me'*, we say, and then get on with the rest of our day.

It does concern me that the news media is attached more to stories of conflict and disaster, than to pictures of goodness and co-operation. If the sharing of events is in some way a call to change – then it usually fails in that regard. If all you are shown is dreadful things you may be led to say – *'there but for the grace of God go I'*, but more likely is to say: *'I'm glad it's not me'*. All of that is a race to the bottom (or at least a little above it).

We have a clear aspiration here in the parish: *‘To be the best churches we can be for all of the people of Haslemere.’* **But that requires some labour.** Set as our guide is the example of Jesus Christ, who was our flesh too – so we can imagine ourselves being like him, and try very hard to be so. **Together, we can be a witness to the greatest exemplar, and to be seen to strive for that.**

St Luke provides us today with a familiar incident, which is full of character and challenge – the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the little exchange which comes before it. Jesus, as usual, is in a local crowd *of all sorts of people*, but most tellingly includes those who were themselves local leaders – **those to whom some good example was expected as those witnessing to God.**

‘Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.’ The gospels often record such characters as *‘teachers of the law’*. That might have meant lawyers by title, but I think it means more like *religious regulators* in what they actually did. Anyone asking, *‘how should I live’*, could get from them a detailed and *statutory* answer. These teachers of the law were concerned that everyone lived *correctly* under God’s Law in all aspects of their lives. **In fact, it seems to have become more about the law, than about the people.** I’m sure that is not what God intended it to be. I have no doubt that by character *some* of them were precise and authoritarian, *by-rote* people given to apply only the letter of the law and never the spirit. **To them, Jesus was a menace because he held them to account with their own words.**

Yet some of these legalists would have found Jesus curious, clever and perhaps bold to speak into difficult matters of law and life in ways that were humanitarian, compassionate and healing. There is good in everyone, I believe, even those who the gospel set as Jesus’s apparent enemies; they themselves were seeking God too.

A lot of people in our society are now returning to Jesus and his message as quite curious and interesting, against the empty common narratives of success, growth and self-respect. Things are changing in the UK, more people are wanting to look up rather than down. We have been shown so much of the bad, that now I think people are searching for the good.

This teacher of the law asked Jesus, **‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’** That is a big thing to ask, and it’s a question that will never fall out of relevance. **How can I have hope of salvation?** – maybe implying that he felt he did not have it, even in all of his own regulated religious conduct. Maybe this Pharisee understood himself *only* in relation to the law given through Moses, after all, that was the structure of his existence, but perhaps that wasn’t enough. Was he seeking a greater outcome to his life than just being able to say that *at least I upheld the law and compelled others to do so.* **Perhaps that did not feel to him like much achieved.**

Jesus does not actually answer this fellow, but instead he leads the teacher of the law into what he already knows. **He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ The teacher answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and your neighbour as yourself.’ Remember, Jesus is in a crowd, it’s a bit of a drama, it’s all gone silent.** Jesus was not against the law per-se, but I’m sure he was suspicious of the way it was captive and applied for its own sake. The gift of the Law was given as a part of the relationship God intended with his people – **that they be holy as he is holy.** So, Jesus is no rabble-raising separatist here, his message is just as reasonable to the most learned as it is for masses. Then the crowd hear it confirmed by the teacher of the law, who is probably living

amongst them as a local. ‘And Jesus said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’ It’s quite neat, but almost too simple – and that’s a common mistake in the clever of our own time too.

I’m now going to pick at words now to make a point, because **I want to avoid a potential discouragement that you might get from the apparent hard link between the awesome gift of eternal life and something you have to *do* to achieve it.** We have to be careful when we hold salvation and effort together. The underlying Greek word for ‘do’ is *Poiei* – which has the literary tense of being something in the present, it’s imperative and it’s active. So, it’s a *do* for *now* (not later), it’s critical to you, and it’s something you yourself must get on with. *Poiei* is often found in the context of building, making, growing and producing. **This ‘do’ is regular and prolonged – Loving God and our Neighbour is for the living of this life, into eternal life.**

Then how will we know we have done it, or enough of it? Have you finished it yet? It’s a good thing from Jesus that the endless nature of this *doing* is yet met with a clear and certain outcome: ‘**and you will live**’. **Effort is required, but it’s an effort of love**, and as we do so God loves us for it too, and we have the loving responses of those neighbours we have loved. **It is ‘as the old phrase goes’, a labour of love. Salvation is a labour of love.**

What then happens is that this teacher of the law asks Jesus ‘*who is my neighbour?*’ Apparently, this is because he has been led into giving a simple answer to a complex question that he himself asked, in front of a crowd who probably knew him. **So, he feels a bit of a chump.** Jesus answers in the parable of the Good Samaritan, one of the best

known of Jesus's truth stories. I don't know how many times I must have taught it to children. In fact, it is quite simple, once you know the characters.

The Man – anyone, us.

The Robbers on the road – the lawless.

The Levite - those who should be exemplary.

The Priest – those who should be exemplary.

The Samaritan – little better than robbers (dehumanised).

With all these characters, we tend to place ourselves in moral comparison. Don't settle for the easy, no effort required, minimum of *just being better than the worst of the cast*. Those of Jesus's time might say: *'well at least we are not robbers and muggers, and no one is perfect, not even Levites or priests, ok maybe there are even some nice Samaritans (although I've never met one!).'* *We may well have said the same ourselves in these times, and of those 'others'.*

Be self-aware in these things. We live somewhere between the badness that is constantly fed to us by the media, and the Christ we come to find here. Set your eyes to higher things and strive in love for all. Look above for the best, the most exemplary picture of Christ in flesh, as we ourselves are, and 'do' that for all of our neighbours. **In truth we are all of these people ourselves, and they are all our neighbours.**

Amen