

Colossians 1. 1-14

Luke 10. 25-37

The vice-President of the United States in January of this year, just ten days after his induction to the role, made a statement in an endeavour to give moral justification, indeed Christian justification, to the fledgling Trump administration's border and migration policies. JD Vance said: "There is a Christian concept that you love your family and then you love your neighbour, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens, and then after that, prioritize the rest of the world."

When I heard it, I wasn't sure where he had got the idea that this was a Christian concept; indeed, Pope Francis didn't either. And the late Pope was clear in his rebuttal of Vance's perversion of the Gospel. Vance's statement was in so many ways an reflection of what becomes of Christian theology and the priorities which the gospel calls people to, when Christian faith and political power become conflated – that the gospel becomes perverted in ways that try to lend a divine mandate to policies and actions which are ultimately dehumanising.

I recently saw a video clip of Pope Francis sitting with some Latin-American teenagers. They were all sitting close to each other in an intimate circle, without minders protecting the Pope or securing a distance between him and them. Their mutual delight in each other's company was palpable. One of the young people asked him about church leaders who encouraged them to condemn others in the name of Christianity. I can't recall if it was LGBTQI people, or illegal migrants or the latest group of people being targeted as public scapegoats. Francis responded to the question by saying that the so-called Christian people who encouraged them to believe these things were imposters. The clarity and courage of his response was disarming and you could see the relief on the faces of these young people as this leader spoke with an authority they knew to be true.

Luke tells us that a lawyer comes to Jesus to test him – this is an attempt at public humiliation of Jesus. His question to Jesus is asked in the same spirit as JD Vance's theology. The lawyer wants to know where is the boundary, what is the limit of this call to love neighbour; surely there must be a limit to my obligation?

But Jesus responds with a story which is maybe now too familiar for us; we have heard it too many times – it's a story about a priest and Levite and Samaritan. Our familiarity with the parable, (has our familiarity bred contempt?) - the sting in the story has been dulled for us with the expression – Oh, they've been a good Samaritan? Anyone who does a good deed to a stranger is a good Samaritan – but the sting of the story is that this is not just any stranger.

This is a story about a person Jesus' listeners have been raised to hate, despise, detest and condemn. Jesus' response to the lawyer is a parable which calls for an understanding of being a neighbour which is rooted in compassion and mercy – not in some legalistic dissection to try and find where the limits of neighbourliness might be.

Luke tells us that the Samaritan is moved with pity. The NRSV is really quite weak in its wording. Brendan Byrne suggests that the Samaritan is overcome with compassion; that he forgets himself and goes toward the wounded man with unself-conscious care. His awareness of the

danger of the place they are in is not in his awareness, so moved is he. And his mercy and generosity continues as he brings the man to the inn, where he then cares for him, hands over money to the inn-keeper and offers to cover any further costs to him. In doing this the Samaritan lays himself open to extortion by the inn-keeper. His compassion is characterised by a kind of divine abandon.

Not only will the cynical lawyer be affronted by this parable about this unlikely neighbour, who we have come to call good, but the whole crowd along with the disciples will be affronted too. A Samaritan?

You may recall from a couple of weeks ago that Jesus and the disciples begin their journey to Jerusalem by making their way through Samaria. The townspeople refuse to welcome them and the disciples are incensed, asking Jesus if he wants them to call down fire from heaven to punish them. No says Jesus. The centuries deep animosity between Jews and Samaritans at the time was bristling. Bristling in a way we might find hard to understand. This week marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre of 8000 men and boys in Srebrenica. A group of so-called Christian people who had lived peaceably alongside their Muslim neighbours for centuries, suddenly turned against them, driven by some ancient animus. I can recall a question arising in myself: where did this hatred come from? This is the kind of deep hatred lurking under the surface for Jesus' listeners.

The lawyer asks his question and Jesus tells a parable with the lawyer and his class included in it. It is a deeply provocative story. The lawyer's need to know the limit of the law, the boundary of his neighbourliness, challenges us also and all of our own boundary setting, all our own revulsions and disgusts and too-often unexamined prejudices. We might ask ourselves about the barrier to our care which gets thrown up when our eyes fall on someone who is doing it tough: the homeless person on the tram; the single mum who is not coping; the dole bludger; the aboriginal person still seeking healing from the dispossession of their people?

I know these limits in myself. Intellectually I subscribe to their care; but I know of a deep limit in myself which excuses me from action. The Samaritan's compassion arises from a place deep in himself which impels him toward the care of the injured man. I know places where I lack mercy. If our distinctions are characterised by a lack of mercy then we can probably be clear that like the lawyer, we are trying to hedge our bets. We might prayerfully attend to these places in prayer.

Paul in writing to the fledgling community of Jesus' followers in Colossae for the growth of faith in them: we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's<sup>[d]</sup> will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup> so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

It is a reminder that the maturing of faithfulness toward God is a never-ending path for us; what John Wesley called sanctification, not sanctimonious-ness, but a growing in holiness, a deepening in our very being which reflects the nature of God – as Jesus has done for us and calls us to.

So may God give us grace as we continue on the path that we might lead fruitful lives and growing in the knowledge of God.

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