

THE EMMAUS SERIES

15th Sunday Year C

Deuteronomy 30:10-14

Colossians 1:15-20

Luke 10:25-37

Who is my neighbour?

In today's gospel reading, we hear again the parable of the Good Samaritan. A familiar story, but its lesson is just as telling today as it was when it was first told – in a world troubled by antagonisms in which religious differences play a big part. Jesus is instructing his disciples. He has not come to abolish the Law that was so important in the faith of old Israel, but to bring it to its fulfilment (Mt 5:17). He uses this exchange with an unfriendly lawyer to illustrate what this means. 'Love your neighbour as yourself', the Law said; this text, however, identified the 'neighbour' as a 'member of your race' (Lev 19:18). Other Old Testament texts, on the other hand, express a more generous and inclusive attitude to the stranger; hence the lawyer's question. Jesus turns the question around. The question he has been asked is self-centred: 'Who should I accept as a neighbour?' The parable takes up a far more generous question: 'How can I be a true neighbour?'

It is not easy for us to appreciate how shocking for Jewish sensibilities was the place given to the Samaritan in the story. Recall the antagonism evidenced in last Sunday's gospel: the Samaritans refuse to receive in their village pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem; and in response, the disciples of Jesus call down God's vengeance. The violence we see so often these days on our television screens can help us to understand how bitter the antagonism between Jews and Samaritans was. Against this background, in the parable of Jesus, it is a Samaritan who is 'moved with compassion' for the battered traveller, and shows himself to be a true neighbour. Jesus gives the story an added edge for his interrogator, so well versed in the Law: the priest and the Levite – probably hurrying home to Jericho after completing their temple duties – pass on the other side, to avoid the possibility of ritual impurity.

Jesus does not scorn the Law; he is a faithful observer of the Law himself; but his story illustrates the fact that the Law was only a preparatory education for the fulfilment that is to take place in his own person – as he gathers all the peoples of the world into the one family of his heavenly Father. He fulfils all that the Law looks forward to; bringing the New Commandment that knows no exclusive limits: 'You must love one another just as I have loved you'. The parable challenges us to reflect upon our own attitudes. We all become indignant at the religious antagonisms that show their ugliness in today's world. But what is the quality of our good will to those who are different from us (ethnically, culturally, and socially); are we ready to show that good will in a practical way?

As we become more familiar with the Old Testament, we are probably dismayed by the spirit of vindictiveness that is sometimes evident. Today's gospel illustrates the way in which the Saviour leads God's people beyond the half-learned lessons of the Old Testament to a full sharing in the ways of God.

John Thornhill sm