

10 July 2022

Amos 7:7-17
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

My mother used to do all the wallpapering in our house: she became quite expert at it. A plumb-line would be employed to ensure that the first drop was placed perfectly vertically. The use of the plumb-line led to an interesting discovery however: if the plumb-line was suspended in one particular corner of the dining room, the plumb-bob would hang in space rather than against either or both of the walls. In that corner neither wall was exactly vertical; both were out of alignment. We had been quite unaware of the issue until then.

The prophet Amos receives a word from God. Israel has become “out of plumb”. Israel has become corrupt; they are oppressing one another, the powerful taking advantage over the weak; and they are misusing the religious apparatus which is designed to keep them aligned to God. It is a state of affairs which is quite out of line with what it would mean to follow through on their covenant calling as the people of God with a particular purpose, and it is a state of affairs which is out of line with any sense of gratitude for God’s saving work among them.¹

When we read of “Israel” in the Old Testament we need to be clear which period of history is in view. King David had ruled over an alliance of tribes that covered the whole of the land. His son Solomon had managed to maintain these alliances, but there was growing dissatisfaction with royal policies. Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, a weaker man, and the alliance could no longer hold together. There was a revolt, and the empire fell apart into two nations. Rehoboam retained the throne in Jerusalem and held the loyalties of the tribe of Judah and the adjacent part of Benjamin. His nation came to be termed “Judah”, although the term “Israel” was often used too as an expression of hope for a future reunification. The northern tribes retained the name “Israel” for themselves and turned to a former royal official, Jeroboam, to be their king. Jeroboam found it necessary to establish rival centres of

¹ See especially Amos 2:6-12. Humphreys, *Crisis*, pp.122-123; Motyer, *Amos*, 160-161; Blenkinsopp, *History*, pp.8--82

worship in the cities of Dan and Bethel, near the upper and lower borders of his territory, and selected the ancient city of Shechem as his capital.²

It is to this northern kingdom of Israel that the word of God came through the prophet Amos. The consequence of their failure to heed the prophet's warnings that they must bring themselves back into line with God's way was that they were overthrown by the Assyrians, and many of their citizens were deported into exile. Over the years to follow, the Assyrians brought in colonists from other nations. The northern kingdom became a melting pot of cultural diversity, with much intermarriage and exchange between the cultures and their religious practices. Those citizens who had been allowed to remain remembered their religious heritage and focused their worship on Mount Gerizim, rejecting anything associated with Jerusalem. Mutual suspicion with their southern neighbours festered and grew in the centuries that followed.³

By the time of Jesus, people from this northern region were known as Samaritans, and the relationship was openly hostile. "The Samaritans were publicly cursed in the synagogues; and a petition was daily offered up praying God that the Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life."⁴ The Samaritans simply did not "line up". This is the background to the famous parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and was set upon by robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and left him for dead. A priest and a Levite (a temple servant) came along, but seeing the man lying there, give him a wide berth. They have good reasons for doing so. It could be a trick; they could leave themselves vulnerable to a similar fate. The victim might be a sinner: and aid is not supposed to be rendered to sinners. The victim might be someone of another race (the potentially distinctive clothing has been stripped from him): and again the offer of aid is at least questionable as a religious duty. But most significantly, the victim

² Humphreys, *Crisis*, pp.111-112.

³ Garland, *Luke*, p.443

⁴ W O E Osterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background*, SPCK, 1936, p.162, quoted in Bailey, *Peasant Eyes*, p.48

might be dead: and contact with a dead body – even to approach a corpse – creates the problem of ritual impurity and the inability to fulfil their religious duties for a time.

And then someone else comes along: a member of the hated Samaritan race. He too has all kinds of reasons to not get involved; and while it is not unheard of for a Samaritan to be in these parts, he is an outsider there, despised, and highly vulnerable.

But despite all the good reasons, the Samaritan goes to the man's aid.

The priest and the Levite acted to guard their vulnerability. The Samaritan exposed himself to risk over and over again, culminating in going into the inn as a foreigner bearing the victim of a crime, identifying himself, and promising to return to cover any debt: in those parts it would be all too easy for him to cop the blame for the whole incident.⁵

There is a pattern in the story, a pattern of actions. In turn each character *came, did something, and went*. The actions of the robbers, the priest, and the Levite can all be briefly summarised as *come, do, go*.

And then we get to the Samaritan. With the Samaritan it isn't a case of *come, do, go*. With the Samaritan it is *come, do, do, do, do, do!*⁶

This truly is love of neighbour in action!

We are so familiar with this story that we see it as being first and foremost about ethics – about how we treat strangers in need. And while it does carry that important connotation, that is not what it is primarily about.

Our problem is that we read the Parable without appreciating its context. Jesus tells this story, this parable, in the context of a dialogue with an expert in Jewish law.⁷

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

⁵ Bailey, *Peasant Eyes*, pp.47-54

⁶ I owe this insight to Bailey, *Peasant Eyes*, pp.40 ff.

⁷ The following owes much to Wright, *Luke*, pp.126-129; and Wright, *Victory*, pp.305-307.

When we hear the words “eternal life” we naturally enough think simply of everlasting life, existence continuing without end. But there is a bigger idea behind it – the idea of the life of the age to come. In the time of Jesus many Jewish thinkers divided history into two periods: ‘the present age’, and ‘the age to come’. The ‘age to come’ is the time when God would at last act decisively to judge evil, to rescue his people, and to create a new world of justice and peace; the new age when God’s rule over all the world would be complete. There would be blessings in store for God’s covenant people when their God established his kingdom.

So the expert in the law wants to know how one gets to be part of this new age: in other words, how does one ensure that one is indeed part of God’s people?

‘What is written in the Law?’ Jesus replied. ‘How do you read it?’

The man goes on to give the standard answer within rabbinical Judaism: Love the Lord your God with your whole being, and Love your neighbour as yourself.

So far, so good.

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’

The expert in the law wants to test Jesus about the boundary markers of Israel (“Israel” in the old sense of the nation centred on Jerusalem) – those who will inherit the life of the age to come. For him, God is the God of *Israel* and neighbours are *Jewish* neighbours. He wants to expose Jesus and his supposedly heretical views about God’s wider plans for the whole world. he wants to show that Jesus is out of plumb.

In answer, Jesus tells his parable of the battered Jew and the Samaritan who breaks all the cultural, religious, and conflict boundaries to rescue him.

Jesus then concludes with a question:

‘Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’

The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’

Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

The parable challenges the Jewish expert in the law, and Jesus' Jewish hearers, to see the Samaritan as a neighbour, as one whom they are commanded to love, as one who, like them, is a child of God.

And by implication the other two on the road in the story – the priest and the Levite – the very kind of people who should be found within the people of God, are astonishingly found not to be neighbours – ironically because they are determined to keep themselves in a state of ceremonial purity, as part of the complex workings of the system that had previously defined the boundaries of Israel, the people of God.

The other meanings and implications of the story that we are familiar with are valid enough in their own way; but the big big point that Jesus was making to his Jewish audience was that outsiders were coming into the kingdom of God, while insiders might find themselves on the outer.

Jesus could of course have made up his story with the roles reversed – a worthy Jew going to the aid of a Samaritan in distress – and the story would have worked to make an important point about how the faithful should behave towards those they despise. But it is so much more sharp and discomfiting for his hearers that Jesus casts the Samaritan in the role of the good guy. Jesus' hearers were forced to contemplate the issue of boundaries.

And that issue is just as applicable to us today too. "Love, [the parable] tells us, must know no limits Who needs me is my neighbour. Whom at the given time and place I can help with my active love, he [or she] is my neighbour and I am his [or hers]."⁸

The expert in the Law had his question. And we have our question too, which we might phrase in the same way: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" *Come, Do, Do, Do, Do, Do...* seems to be the required answer given by this dialogue and the parable.

⁸ Claude G Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd Ed, Ktav, 1927, p.468, quoted in Garland, *Luke*, 448.

The lawyer sought to justify himself, to show he knew where the people-of-God plumb-line fell. And we too want to be justified: we want to be found to be in right standing with God. Do I line up? Am I true?

The danger is that we can think it is all about *Do, Do, Do, Do, Do.....* But the thing is, we can never *do* enough: the demands of love of God and neighbour are absolute. “If pressed logically, the lawyer’s question about how to ‘inherit’ eternal life is pointless. One does not *do* anything to inherit something; one either is or is not an heir.”⁹

We cannot obey or behave our way into the family of God or into the life of the age to come.¹⁰ It is pure gift. For us, helpless to help ourselves, Jesus is the vulnerable Samaritan who risks all to come to our rescue. God the Father adopts us and names us as his beloved children. That is our identity – in the same way that it is the identity of Jesus (as Pauline Simonsen noted last week).

We are beloved children of God. And then, secure in that identity, we go on to obey, to act, to *Do*.

There is a meanness of spirit and self-centredness that asks “Who is my neighbour?”, seeking to circumscribe the *Doing*. Rather, reflecting the fact that there is nothing we have done or can do to earn our inheritance, we should act with grace and generosity toward others. The Samaritan pours oil and wine on the wounds of the man in the road; oil and wine often poured out in the rituals of worship are now used to express gratitude for God through an act of service toward another.¹¹

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

“According to Jesus, eternal life is a relationship with God that begins in *this* life.”¹²

Through Jesus this relationship is made available to us as gift. We are found to line up because Jesus does the truing up for us.

Do you receive this gift?

And how might you respond to express your gratitude?

⁹ Garland, *Luke*, p.447.

¹⁰ See Bailey, *Peasant*, p.38

¹¹ Bailey, p.50

¹² Garland, *Luke*, p.447, (emphasis added). Garland directs us to John 6:47, 54, 68; 10:27-28; 17:3.

Sources:

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