

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 10)
Tidenham, Tutshill, and the Chase, 2025

Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I reckon I've been worshipping in the churches of this parish for 30 years. And over that time I don't know how many thousand acts of worship I have attended, sermons I have heard, moments of great joy, great sadness, and just plain silliness I have been part of. I think of wonderful midnight masses in Tidenham, being driven out of Chase and worshipping outdoors because of bees, or wasps, or whatever they were. [And in the plain silly category, Janice forgetting to switch off her radio mic before taking her child to the bathroom, right here in Tutshill].

There have been some milestones along the way. Three incumbents: Brian, Royston and David. Three vacancies to navigate. National tragedies to negotiate, more local moments of grief and sadness. And then big international moments as well. I wonder how many of you were worshipping here at the millennium? Royston sensibly set the millennium service for midday on New Year's Day, I was 20, but I made it. Was anyone else there? Can anyone remember what the reading was? Well, as you might have guessed, because preachers are laughably predictable, it was the parable of the Good Samaritan.

When Churches Together, who put together the ecumenical liturgy to mark the turning of the age, needed to choose a Bible reading that would, in theory be read in every Christian community at the gate of a new millennium, they chose the

reading we have just heard. The story of mercy. Out of all the possible passages available, they chose this one. I wonder whether you would have chosen similarly?

It's a well-known parable of course, even though interestingly it's only in the gospel according to Luke. It's unique to his account. When I sat down to look at this text last week I read it in a translation that I don't often use, and I was fascinated by some of the things that struck me afresh. And, by the way, that's a useful tip if your Bible reading ever starts to grow dry, or even stops completely, which can happen to any of us. Just grab a different translation off-the-shelf. Read the Scripture in a different translation, and you will be amazed at how the text pops off the page in a new way. So I read this in the English Standard Version on Monday, and it's really interesting.

The parable of course is about mercy, as I've said. And it is about being a neighbour. This is deep ethical teaching of Christ. Some theologians, people like Augustine, layer on an allegorical reading as well, where the Samaritan is actually Jesus, and that's fun to play with, but I think at its heart this is about behaviour.

The lawyer wants to identify the least effort, the least cost, way of inheriting eternal life. He wants to do this cheaply. 'Who is my neighbour', he asks, because he wants to be able to exclude everyone who *isn't* his neighbour, so he only has to focus on loving that small subset of people. Churches occasionally fall into this trap. And he gets rather blown out of the water by Christ's response, which is to locate the neighbour as the one who is merciful. One of the interesting little variations of translation in the Bible I was using on Monday translated that vital question of Christ as, 'which one of these three, do you suppose, *proved himself* a neighbour the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' Not just 'was a neighbour'. There's an

activity in that phrase, proved himself. This is about living the life of Christ. Not just thinking it, or doing it in here for an hour once a week. This is about living out our baptism, every day.

One of the other interesting differences in translation was in verse 33. The Bible that the Church of England tends to use these days, the New Revised Standard Version, uses the word 'pity' of the Samaritan. 'When he saw the man, he was moved with pity.' But this other version uses the word 'compassion', which I think is a better word, because sadly in English the word 'pity' has attracted some slightly negative connotations. I asked a chum of mine who is a biblical scholar, and the Greek word in the original text, which is the pretty outrageously hard to pronounce ἐσπλαγγνίσθη es-plags-nee-ss-they, can be just as readily translated 'compassion' as 'pity'. Both are accurate renderings of the original. But compassion is more helpful to us I think, because crucially it has that element in it of empathy. The derivation is literally, 'to suffer with'. I think you can pity someone without suffering with them. But it's jolly hard to have compassion without empathy. We are to recognise our neighbour as the person who sees us, sees who we really are, and is interested in being where we are. Is ready to come to meet us. And when we love our neighbour as ourselves, it is because we have begun to actually see the people around us, to identify their needs, and to recognise our common humanity. It's about coming alongside which is of course very Jesus, because that is what happens at Christmas. Our salvation is not wrought by some far-off, distanced, absent deity, but by the God-man who, for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man. [You might notice that really old-fashioned priests like me bow our heads at that phrase in the Creed to recognise that ultimate act of compassion as God comes man]. Who puts himself on the dusty road of our journey, that he may encounter

us on our travels, and bind up our wounds. Who suffers for us, to carry us home.

There is a popular secular version of the Good Samaritan story that you sometimes hear - it was in the West Wing, if any of you watch that - which goes that this guy is walking down the road and falls into a hole. The hole has steep sides, and he can't climb out. A priest walks past, the guy shouts, 'help I'm stuck in this hole!' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it in the hole, and carries on. Then a doctor walks past, and the guy shouts out again, and the doctor writes out a prescription and throws it in the hole and carries on. Then his mate walks past, and he shouts out, 'hey Joe. Can you get me out of this hole?' And his friend jumps into the hole with him. The guy says, 'are you crazy! Now we're both stuck in this hole'. This friend says, 'ah yes, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out.' Compassion.

The Good Samaritan teaches us something about developing the heart of Christ, which ought to be the object of all Christians. To become like Christ. Christ, who tells us who our neighbour is, and what it means to be a community that takes that seriously. And that is what is being developed by Paul in the letter to the Colossians, verses which we also heard this morning. We are to 'lead lives worthy of the Lord', which amongst other things includes endurance, patience, fruitful good work.

The final little translation difference that struck me was in the very final verse. After the lawyer has identified that the neighbour was the one who showed the man mercy, it read, 'Jesus said to him, "*You* go, and do likewise.'" Which just adds a little extra poke, doesn't it. You go. This is not optional. This is baked in to becoming more like Christ. The Christian is

merciful. The Christian is compassionate. Because the Christian expects his or her neighbour everywhere. In everyone.

25 years ago Churches Together wanted us to begin the new millennium with this parable. A quarter-century later, there is still just as much here for the people of Tidenham. Eyes up, friends. Don't stop looking. Don't stop noticing. Resist all temptation to draw the boundaries narrowly. No cheap grace here. Christ's way is costly, [as we will remember in a moment or two at the altar]. 'Which one of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? 'The one who showed him mercy'. Jesus said to him, 'you go, and do likewise.'

Amen.