

## **Year C Proper 10**

### **Luke 10:25-37**

Bob Holman, the Christian academic and community activist, who died on 15th June this year was one of the most unsettling people I have ever met. He came to lecture at a college I was attending in the 1990s. Here was a man who gave up a very good job as Professor of Social Administration at the University of Bath to move to the Southdown council estate in Bath to live among and to serve the poor. Later he moved to Easterhouse, outside Glasgow, one of the

most deprived housing schemes in Britain, and gave the remainder of his life to helping the poor and disadvantaged. One day he came to give a lecture to a very middle class bunch of students who would have been good at saying the right things but would have struggled to really understand the radical call of the Christian life. And from the moment he began to speak I can remember feeling very uncomfortable. He was telling stories that made sense, but he was telling them in a way that challenged my sensitivities.

Likewise Jesus seemed to have had a profoundly unsettling impact on those who saw him and heard him. Even among those people who would come to see him as their friend, Jesus had the uncanny knack of making them feel distinctly uncomfortable. In the familiar surroundings of Israel, where so much was predictable, Jesus had a habit of making people feel uncomfortable. I suppose it's a bit like deciding to move the living room furniture around one afternoon while your husband is out for the day. What's it going to feel like for him when he returns? It's the same room, with the same

outlook, but it feels entirely different.....

Jesus' unsettling impact was experienced, of course, often through the telling of strange stories. Now the stories were strange, not because they appeared to be unusual or difficult on the surface, but because they didn't quite sound right on reflection. What exactly was Jesus talking about when he told the story of the man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho? Well, the answer is easy, isn't it? He was encouraging people to look out for folk in need and go to their aid. Furthermore, because of the history of conflict between Jews and Samaritans, he

was making the point that religious and racial prejudice needs to be challenged by action and these barriers can only be broken down when we put love into action. Doesn't that seem right? That's the way these stories have been traditionally understood. Now, those moral nuggets are no doubt there in the story. We hear them and they have inspired countless numbers of people to act in kindness to help a neighbour in need. Clearly that is a good thing but it's a great shame to miss so much more. It is possible to hear these messages, as challenging as they are, and to pack the story away as read

and understood. That has happened so often with this parable and with so many others as well. But it won't do. You see, Jesus is not a mouthpiece for moral truth, as if moral truth has a life of its own detached from him. He was a living, breathing human being who believed he was in Israel for a purpose. That purpose could not be cut off from his words, his storytelling, as if he told stories to amuse and challenge on the one hand, and journeyed to eventual arrest and death on the other. We cannot possibly understand the stories; the parables, without seeking understanding in his own, purposely

lived life. Sometimes people will claim allegiance to Christianity on the basis that they are happy to sign up to the great moral truths of the religion, but will reject the significance of the son of God dying for the world because God's love for it is so great. But the one without the other does not make sense..... So the key to understanding this parable is not to try and extract moral principles from the story but instead to try and understand how the story reflects the nature of the one who is telling it. Remember the parable was told in response to a question about receiving eternal life.

The answer was to love the Lord your God with everything you have and to love your neighbour as yourself. It's the love of God that is critical and it's the one who was standing there about to tell the parable who is crucial in understanding what this love of God is all about. How do you love God if not by loving the one sent by God, his Son, who will demonstrate God's love? So, as we explore meaning in this parable we need to hold together the specific actions of the good Samaritan with the wider actions of Jesus who told the story. So what was Jesus actually doing? Well, he was on his way to



an ultimate and decisive confrontation with evil. An evil that had gripped his own people Israel and so distorted their understanding of who they were that they had lost their way. An evil that was so widespread that the entire world was under its influence and control and only a decisive action of God was going to provide a rescue. And rescue could only be effective in himself, God's servant, God's Son; ultimately in the giving of his own life. It was as serious as that. But getting that point across to an Israel that was becoming increasingly more obsessed with trivial concerns regarding national identity

was proving very difficult indeed. So he told a story about a man on a journey who got into trouble.... Can you recognise the hated other as your neighbour? You had better or a worse fate might befall you. We all have a tendency to retreat into our safety zone. The place where our views are heard and reinforced by the people who think the same way as we do. It feels good in the safety zone, but it's really a dangerous place to be. It was dangerous for me to sit and listen to Bob Holman and then instead of taking heed to search for reinforcement of my prejudices among my fellow students. We all indulged

in that, but it was dangerous because it was denying the new life, the eternal life that inspired the lawyer's question to Jesus in the first place.

On 11th November 2005 The Guardian newspaper reported the story of the shooting of a twelve year old Palestinian boy, Ahmad Khatib. He had been killed by Israeli soldiers while playing with his toy gun during rioting in the West Bank. He was taken to an Israeli hospital where he died of his wounds two days later. His parents, refusing to allow their grief to overwhelm them decided to donate his organs to Israelis. Six people

received the benefit of his organs. His mother said, “My son was dead but at the same time maybe he could provide life to others and maybe he could reduce their pain.”<sup>1</sup> These parents, showing mercy and compassion were experiencing ‘the go and do likewise’ that Jesus spoke about and in acting in this way were living this new life; this eternal life that the lawyer was so concerned about.

It is in our treatment of one another that we find truth. The truth about our spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> [www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/11/israel1](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/11/israel1)

state and the truth about the man who walked a lonely road to his death for us. The lawyer was concerned about his state: “what must *I* do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus jolted him out of his self-preoccupation to look at the needs of others. You will not find answers gazing inwards but only as you get out and serve your neighbour in need. And don’t try to push the challenge away by narrowly defining your neighbour in a way that suits you. There’s your neighbour lying in the ditch. There. It doesn’t matter where he comes from or what he’s been up to. Serve him. Bandage up his wounds and

bring him to safety. Only then will you know anything about the new life, the eternal life the lawyer was asking about because only then can you be like the lonely man who walked to Calvary to give his life for the world.