

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time C (Dt 30:10-14; Col 1:15-20; Lk 10: 25-37) By John H. Howard, C.J.M

By teaching with parables Jesus was using a literary form all his contemporaries were familiar with. Rabbis used parables abundantly in their teaching. A parable usually focuses on one main lesson. Often Jesus' parables have the particular characteristic of shocking the listeners. Being far removed from the context in which Jesus told his parables, we don't always get a true sense of the impact they made on his audiences. We need to adapt them to our own time and place to get some of the initial shock effect. The parable that we call the Good Samaritan must have particularly shocked and even scandalized his listeners.

The expert who questioned Jesus seems to have been somewhat arrogant about his knowledge of the law. He wanted to stump this country bumpkin from Galilee. Consequently his first question was rather condescending: **"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"** Luke says he was **"a scholar of the law,"** so he was asking a question to which he obviously knew the answer. The Law of Moses was the supreme guide to gain eternal life for any Jew. Any idiot knew that and especially an expert in the law. As he usually did with people who were trying to trick him, Jesus answered his question with a question. He even serves him a little condescension of his own, to this scholar of the law he asks an obvious question: **"What is written in the law?"** Like a good student in catechism class, the great lawyer gave the right answer: **"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."** Jesus answered: **"You have answered correctly; do this and you shall live."** It was the equivalent of tapping him on the head and say **"Good boy, do that and everything be will be ok."** Question closed.

However our smart Alex expert is not satisfied; he wants the last word, so he asked another obvious question: **"And who is my neighbor?"** I imagine everybody around saying as the kids say today, **"Daw."** But that is where Jesus shocked them all. Everyone believed that as the Chosen People they were superior to all others. Their neighbor was their fellow Israelites; the others, the Gentiles were considered worthless. To describe them they used names like **"dogs"** and **"fodder for Hell."** A degree lower even than the pagans were the **"Samaritans."** There was no such thing in their minds as a **"Good Samaritan."** That would have been an oxymoron. They were a mix breed of Jewish and pagan blood. They kept only part of the Law of Moses and practices of Judaism. They did not recognize the Temple in Jerusalem and worship in their own temple on Mount Garizim. They were considered heretic and schismatic. And Jesus chose a Samaritan to give his lesson on who is our neighbor!

To get all the impact this parable we have to translate it into

our own life. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho was a very dangerous road. People generally traveled in groups for safety or with an armed escort. The imprudent traveler of the parable was like someone venturing at night in a crime infested area. He was beaten and left for dead. One can only imagine the shiver that went through the audience when Jesus dare to say that only a Samaritan had the compassion to stop and take care of him. The thought of being touched by a Samaritan was repulsive to any Israelite. If the poor man had been conscious he would have refused his help.

It is difficult for most of us to imagine the dept of their prejudice. I'm sure we all consider ourselves more open minded than that, and hopefully we are. But still, we have our prejudices, our prejudgments on people and customs. We also have our limits. Who do we despise the most? Who makes our skin crawl? Whose touch would make us shutter? Who are the Samaritans in our lives? That is the dept of Jesus teaching. What we do in the end says more about who we are than what we claim to believe or others think of us.

There are two other characters in this parable; they are the priest and the Levite. They represented the other end of the spectrum for Jesus' audience. They were the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron. They were the priestly cast who served in the Temple of God. They represent the clerical establishment of Israel. They can't let themselves be soil by touching a man who might be dead. To be fair we must admit the priest and the Levite had a lot at stake if they had stopped to help. The priests offered the sacrifices and the Levites rendered other services in the Temple. There were thousands of them but only one Temple. Their turn to serve was determined by chance. They were lucky if they got to serve once a year. When chosen they had to keep themselves ritually clean or lose their turn. If either the priest or the Levite had touched that man they would have been defiled and would have had to give up their turn in the Temple. So, they turned their heads and look the other way.

How many times have we all said or thought: **"I can't get involve; what will everybody think?"** **"How is that going to be seen in the community?"** And we would be right. The more we take Jesus seriously, the better chance we have not to be popular. Few in any of us will have the opportunity for great public heroism. Neither will many of us defend some unpopular cause publicly. A more common occasion will be to stand on the side of charity and reach out to the wounded within our own family, our parish or our community. Over the years I met different people who had been accused, rightly or rightly, of something. All told me that they immediately lost 95% of their friends. It sometimes takes a lot of courage to not follow the crowd, to say no to gossip or give someone another chance. How often have we acted like the priest and the Levite and not like the Samaritan?