

## 14 July 2019 Trinity 4 St Thomas

There is a story about Albert Einstein walking across the college green in Oxford in 1942 after his students had taken their end of year Physics Exams. One of his colleagues remarked that as far as they could remember, Einstein had set the same questions as the previous year. Yes, he said. But isn't that a problem? The students will have an unfair advantage. Einstein said he wasn't worried as 'This year the answers are different'.

The problem with the story of the 'Good Samaritan' is that like the students exam questions it's familiar. We all know it and we might think we know the answers. It's one of the best known stories of the NT and we've all heard it many times. The story follows a familiar pattern and even if we had never heard it before, anyone who knows anything about story telling will know that it's the third character who is going to save the day. It's a story about a lawyer asking a difficult question. Except it wasn't supposed to be difficult. It was supposed to catch Jesus out. As Luke recounts. He stood up to test Jesus. It's not a nice story at all. For some of the listeners it was deliciously shocking.

The first truth and what makes the story really cutting is that the people Jesus uses in his story to walk on by are the religious ones. They're the special people, the ones who as far as their culture was concerned REALLY have a place in God's Kingdom. We have probably all heard the explanations about how they probably thought that they had a good excuse not to touch the body (if the person was dead) as it would have made the priest ritually unclean and be a real problem for him in his duties. I've heard of some people who don't take cleaning seriously – I even heard of one family who used to keep 'get well cards handy' so that if anyone came round unexpectedly, they could put them on the mantelpiece and people would think that the house was dirty because they'd been ill and unable to keep the place clean. But for the Priest, being ritually clean was a serious business. Num 19 states that he must avoid corpse impurity. Touching a dead or dying body, even holding a hand over it, would render the priest ritually impure and put his temple service at risk for seven days. He would have to go through ritual cleansing to regain his purity status and enable him to do his work. But is this really an excuse for walking on by? And it isn't the point of the story anyway. Because the story isn't a nice one at all to the

Lawyer. To those listening they'd have been sucking their teeth and thinking, 'Golly this Rabbi Jesus is living dangerously.'

For the third character is no ordinary stranger. People all over the world and throughout history have differentiated themselves from those they see as inferior and foreign by making fun of them. Take the oldest-known joke book in the world: Philogelos, Greek for "The Laughter Lover," compiled from several manuscripts dating from the 11th to 15th centuries but believed to have been penned in the 4th century A.D. Of the 265 jokes in the book, nearly a quarter concern people from cities renowned in their culture for being idiots.

The phenomenon is truly global. Uzbeks get made fun of in Tajikistan while in France, it's the French-speaking Swiss. Israelis rib Kurdish Jews. The Irish, it turns out, have a particularly bad lot. Dumb-Irish jokes are equally common in England, Wales, Scotland, and Australia. Although it could be worse: If you happen to be an Irishman from County Kerry, you even get made fun of by your fellow Irishmen as well. The model even extends to the work world: on a building site the sparkies deride the brickies who deride the plasterers and all trades deride the painters.

And we have a story about the outsider, the Samaritan helping (and it's really hard for us to understand just how offensive that was.) Jesus asks the lawyer "...and who was the neighbour to the man?" The Lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan. Jesus asks, "Who was a neighbour...?" And he begrudgingly says, "The one who helped him..."

The shock of what the Lawyer is forced to say is difficult to over-emphasise. In religious terms, the Samaritans were the sworn enemies of the Jews. Prayers were offered by some Jews that the Samaritans would not inherit eternal life. The very idea that a Samaritan would be the one who Jesus would put up as a model of integrity, as an example of love for others, and that Jesus would tell the lawyer to go and imitate the love of the Samaritan was unthinkable. It's like me telling you a story about how Abu Hamza stopped by to help raise funds for our church.

So what does it mean to us? Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days that he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to

Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So, one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the church, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go and worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned, "If Christians have caste differences also" he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." That usher's prejudice betrayed Jesus and turned a person away from trusting the one true God and Jesus as Lord.

In September, some key people from our church family will be meeting for a day to pray and discuss and to try and discern where God wants us to concentrate our efforts for the next few years. The last time The Bourne held such a day, one of the outcomes was for the church to become a more welcoming church. If I'm allowed to be proud of a church community, I'm proud that whenever I ask new people at St Thomas's, "Have you been made welcome?" Invariably, the unequivocal answer is "Yes!" I'm delighted that we have a welcome team and that people come and take a genuine interest in new people who come through our doors on a Sunday morning. But before you start preening yourselves too much, it's not all sweetness and light. How many of you look sideways at the new family whose children are making a noise? I KNOW it's annoying, but when you're new, one unsympathetic glance is enough sometimes. And what about the reports I hear about people gossiping during the service. Moaning about some initiative or mistakes in the Broadsheet. Too much music, not enough music. Not enough congregational singing, that ladies' hat is too big....

So, who are you going to be? Sure and certain of your place in eternal life and walking by on the other side? Or open and forgiving of someone that doesn't quite fit into 'our church' and God forbid, they've sat in OUR usual seat.

(One of these days I really will say we will have a Sunday where I will suggest that you can't sit where you normally sit.)

Good teacher, said the Lawyer, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said... well you know the story.... "Go and do likewise"... The

deed won't earn you eternal life, but hopefully it will say something about your faith in God and Jesus as Lord.