



## **Sensitivity to the Other: The Example of the Samaritan Man**

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**W**ho is the other? How can we treat him or her. The parable or example of the Samaritan man is valid even today. A careful examination of the text shows that there are two distinct episodes in **Luke 10:25-37**: (1)

A pronouncement about the double commandment of love; (2) the story of the Good Samaritan. These episodes seem to have existed separately in the Jesus' tradition which Luke received. By introducing the lawyer's question: Who is my neighbour?, Luke makes an attempt to connect the two episodes. But the attempt is not very successful since the parable of the Good Samaritan does not really answer the lawyer's question.

### **The Story of the Samaritan Man**

Though the story of the Good Samaritan is often called a parable, it is better understood as an example (an "exemplum" in Rhetoric). It provides a practical model for a Christian conduct which responds to the radical demands of the Gospel. It also includes the approval or the disapproval of certain modes of behaviour.

Crucial to the understanding of the story are certain significant details:

1. The privileged status of the priest and the Levite in Palestinian Jewish society. Their Levitical heritage associated them intimately with the Temple cult and the heart of Jewish life as worship of Yahweh.
2. Defilement thought to be derived from contact with a dead or an apparently dead body. The priest and the Levite passed by on the other side in order to avoid contamination by contact with a dead body.
3. The attitude of the Palestinian Jews towards the Samaritans is summed up so well by John 4/9: Jews use nothing in common with the Samaritan (non *coutuntur*). Their history made them schismatics in the eyes of the Jews, and relations with them were far from cordial.

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These details underlie the story's basic contrast: the compassion and kindness shown by a schismatic Samaritan to an unfortunate human victim stands out vividly against the heartless, law-inspired insensitivity of two official representatives of the Jewish religion. Thus, the point of the story is summed up in the lawyer's reaction, that a 'neighbour' is anyone in need with whom one comes in contact and to whom one can show compassion and kindness, even beyond the bounds of one's own ethnic or religious group.

### **Sensitivity to the Other**

The story of the Good Samaritan raises some questions for us. I shall discuss just three of them:

**1.** What is the place of law in our life? Or what influence does it exert on our behaviour?

The priest and the Levite in the story were insensitive men because of their fidelity to the laws regarding defilement. But the regulations on defilement from contact with a dead body were also to be found in the Samaritan Pentateuch, but they did not prevent the Samaritan from being sensitive and helpful to a person in need. His compassion and kindness enabled him to transcend such restrictions. His love and concern goes beyond all rules and regulations.

We are disciples and ministers of Jesus who declared that Sabbath is for humankind. Sabbath was indeed the highest religious law of the Jews, but Jesus subordinated it to the welfare of the human person. What would be for us a healthy attitude to law which does not prevent us from being sensitive and helpful to people in need? This question needs an honest answer.

**2.** Is insensitivity to people in need a vocational hazard of priestly/religious life? Because of the kind of training we have received, because of the style of life we have adopted, do we inevitably tend to be blind and deaf to the cries of people in agony? As priests we are called to be mediators between God and people. We are meant to be signs, sacraments of God's presence and activity in the world. Yet we seem to be quite different from the God of the Exodus who says:

I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...  
(Exodus 3:7-8)

**3.** Do we tend to be communal in our social concern? Is our approach to the problems and needs of people much too Church-centred?

In the Gospel passage when the lawyer speaks of the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself he is quoting Leviticus 19:18. In the context neighbour means a fellow Israelite. Let me quote the two verses immediately before 19:18:

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself (Lev 19:16-17).

But the Samaritan who is held up as a model for us does not primarily think of himself as a Samaritan but as a human being. Hence for him the important thing was not that a Jew was in need of help but that a human being was. In this context let me quote the perceptive comment of Pope Benedict XVI (now *Emeritus*):

The parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37) offers two particularly important clarifications. Until that time, the concept of “neighbour” was understood as referring essentially to one’s countrymen and to foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel; in other words, to the closely-knit community of a single country or people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour. The concept of “neighbour” is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all humankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now (*Deus Caritas Est*, n.15)

### **Concluding Remarks**

We live in a country where the pride of one ethnic or religious group forces another group to develop an equally false and divisive pride of its own; when the selfishness of one group forces

another group to develop a selfishness of its own. It is here that we are called upon to practise the universalism of Christian love. We believe that the object of God's love is the whole world, that Jesus Christ died not just for Christians but for all human beings. This demands that we be sensitive to the problems and needs of everyone, that we be at the service of all. As Vatican II declares: "Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men and women of the modern world ever more generously and effectively" (GS 93).

It is here that we see the significance of the double commandment of love which in Luke serves as a preface to the story of the Good Samaritan. It is only when we really love people, only when we are genuinely interested in and concerned about their problems and needs that we can truly be sensitive to them. Thus we can be sensitive to the Other in their Otherness. 🌹

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