

## Proper 10, Year C

Deuteronomy 30: 9-14  
Psalm 25: 1-9.  
Colossians 1: 1-14  
Luke 10: 25-37

It's difficult to preach on such a famous text! What is there that you haven't heard before? Perhaps it will do no harm to hear it again.

*Duty versus love.* Placing duty over love is what the priest and Levite did. There are times when we've all done that. There's a scene in John Le Carré's *Smiley's People* where George Smiley is writing to Karla to confront him with the evidence of his duplicity. Karla, the Russian secret service boss, demands loyalty to the system above all else, and anyone who transgresses is imprisoned or worse. But he has a secret. He has a daughter, supposedly with psychiatric illness, hidden away in a clinic in Switzerland. He channels some of his budget into secret accounts to support her. He is not living by the standards of duty that he exacts from others. George Smiley writes to Karla: 'you have placed love above duty'. Karla has at last done right, but at the cost of having to leave home, lose respectability and become an outcast. This is the penalty that comes of doing the right thing. And the longer we delay, the heavier the penalty.

*Who is my neighbour?* The lawyer wants a definition of 'neighbour' so that he can do things by the book and keep his nose clean. If you're a Liverpool supporter, the neighbour in need could be a Man U supporter. If you're a Laois supporter, the neighbour in need could be a Carlow supporter. If you're an ardent republican, your neighbour could be a royalist. If you're out of work and in negative equity, the neighbour in need might be a banker.

*It's easy to fall into the lawyer's trap.* You could say 'central Africa is a long way away and I don't come across the starving millions in my daily activities, so they are not my neighbours. Anyway, I wouldn't know about them if it weren't for modern communications.' This is being like the lawyer, wanting a definition of neighbour so that you can draw lines in order to do things by the book and keep your nose clean. Or you might say: 'is he really in need? I saw that so-called beggar arrive round the corner in a Mercedes.' Or you might say: 'she's got a medical card and is better off on benefits than I am.' These are distractions, I think. I have sympathy with those observations—there is nothing in Scripture that says we should not be responsible for ourselves and there is nothing that says we should expect a free ride (the opposite, in fact)—but to drawing lines like this is to be like the lawyer. If you see someone in need, help them. End of. *When I come into your presence I become your neighbour.*

*Think about the Samaritan.* Did he stand to gain by crossing over and helping? He would have been delayed, and he was certainly out of pocket. Everybody helps friends and people they like. But are we willing at some personal cost to help anyone who needs it? It's easy to chuck cash into a church gate collection. You feel better about yourself. I feel uneasy about such collections. It's like having a fix of chocolate, or toast and butter. They lull us into a self-satisfied glow, at least for a short time. Love in practice means *action*, something personal. Throwing coins into a bucket is cosmetic and spiritually dangerous for it induces complacency.

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Think about the victim.* What does he, a Jew presumably, feel about being even touched, let alone helped, by a Samaritan? Would he permit it if he were healthy? Are there people you don't want to touch you? Are there some people you will not sit next to? Do you know someone who refuses help from certain people? That kind of pride, to which we are all prone, harms only the proud. When you're at death's door, you will accept help from anyone. When you've lost everything, you've nothing else to lose. If I refuse someone's help, I haven't suffered enough yet.

*The Samaritan is Jesus.* The priest and Levite represent Jewish law that advises people to *avoid* sin. This is a bit like advising chocoholics to avoid chocolate, or me to avoid salt. No use at all. It's help we need! The help, the healing comes from someone—the enemy in the story—who has crossed to the other side (God to man). An unlikely source. The Samaritan/Jesus takes the victim to the Inn. The Inn is the church and its sacraments: the cleansing waters of Baptism, and the Body and Blood, 'the spiritual medicine of the People of God'. All of us who have been baptized, *very members incorporate in the mystical body*, can be Christs, ministering to the world. In Colossians we hear of Jesus (the Samaritan in this story) as the image of the Divine. God is love, and Jesus is love in action. *In God there is no un-Christlikeness at all.*

Part of me is a world-weary cynic, worn down by slithering and slimy politics of academic life, church life, government scandals, bureaucratic nonsense, trials of daily life and the shame and mistakes that come after 63 years of consciousness on this planet. This part of me is the priest, the Levite, too busy, too weary, too impatient to stop. But part of me is still a wide-eyed mischievous 6-year old, open to the world, trusting and naïve, who thinks that people are basically good *despite* our inevitable cock-ups. This part of me is the Samaritan, and this part of me is the bit that I can concentrate on. We are all called to be Samaritans. As the writer of Deuteronomy says: the word is in *your* mouth and *your* heart.

*When I come into your presence, or you into mine, we become neighbours.*