

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at the commissioning of the Reverend Daniel Connor in the parish of Wyong 2012.

Text: Luke 10: 29-37.

Each of us creates a personal context for what we hear about Jesus. It is impossible for this not to be so.

We hear a story like the very well-known parable of the Good Samaritan and immediately as we listen our imaginations get to work. We give each of the characters in the parable clothing, personality, even facial features. If we had time tonight and we had the professionals on hand, each of us could be interviewed to give an identity-kit picture of each of the characters in the parable – the lone Jew travelling to Jericho, the priest from the Temple in Jerusalem, the Levite and the foreigner, the Samaritan.

It might surprise us to ponder whose faces we put to each of those characters. Are any of the faces we have pictured in our mental images from the parable sinister or benign? Indeed, have we in picturing the characters gone beyond the details offered in the parable itself?

And from whose perspective do we read the parable –the Samaritan (the helper) or the violated man (the victim)? Do we read the parable from the perspective of power or powerlessness?

In one sense, reading the gospels is similar to reading a novel. We automatically develop pictures of the scenes being detailed. The more interesting question is: from where do we draw the caricatures that we create in our mind's eye? What is that telling us about our inner world and the world view that we bring to our hearing Holy Scripture?

I begin in this way because I think there are several conversions that we must undergo if we are to be faithful effective disciples of Jesus and collectively a faithful effective church in Wyong and district.

In my own discipleship I have undergone a primal conversion to faith in the Lord Jesus. And there have been subsequent conversions –a theological conversion when I suddenly became aware of and was taught the overarching significance of the kingdom of God in the preaching and mission of Jesus.

Later with that theological conversion impacting upon me, I worked for our national mission agency, the Australian Board of Mission. In that capacity I visited churches in South East Asia, particularly in Sabah and Kuching dioceses. These visits had enormous personal impact upon me as have subsequent experiences at the Lambeth Conferences of talking with Anglican Bishops from dioceses where being Christian carries a potential death threat. I particularly remember such stories from bishops in Africa and Pakistan.

I was taken when I visited Sabah and Kuching dioceses to remote villages. Here worship was simple and plaintive. I clearly remember mothers with very sick babies holding them up to the priest for prayers for healing. These were desperate people, crying out to God in anguish and hope on the basis of their new-found faith in Christ.

And later, they offered the most exquisite hospitality from their very real poverty. These experiences seemed to be alive with the atmosphere of the New Testament; I felt in some way that I had been transported into the pages of the Acts of the Apostles.

What these experiences did to me was to haul me out of a genteel mental imaging of being Christian and replace it with the lived hard-reality of those for whom subsistence was their daily chronic life-style.

I began to think from the perspective of the violated traveller on that road from Jerusalem to Jericho, the man beaten-up and left half-dead, and not from the perspective of the generous helper (the Samaritan) or from the indifferent (the priest and the Levite). It became an experience of going beyond the Good Samaritan.

This is the challenge I want to place before this church and its new priest tonight – that you go beyond the Good Samaritan and that you think as disciples from the perspective of those in need in your community, of how you may be alongside them to share the Gospel.

I do not have to remind you that Wyong is demographically a region of great social need. If we as a church are to have credibility in this locality we must think and respond from the perspective of those who are most hurting, most vulnerable, most sinned against.

Dan Connor's commissioning provides a providential period for assessing how this church must undertake effective faithful local mission. It is apparent that sadly in Australia there are very spiritually selfish versions of churches developing, wherein the concerns of those attending them are focused on their own aspirations for better economic and fulfilled lives. It is as if for such churches Jesus was more a life-style personal trainer than a saviour or a prophet.

Unintendedly, if our awareness of the context of Jesus' mission and preaching is created by our own experience without reference to the vast body of knowledge that unpacks the original context of his ministry and his teaching about the kingdom of God, then we will simply live out our own inner worlds disguised as Christian mission. In doing this, we could be light years away from what Jesus was proclaiming and insisting upon.

The twentieth century martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that when faith gets reduced to a matter of private concern, too much is ceded to advancing secularism. The implication of Bonhoeffer's teaching is that the task of the local church is not just to give Christians opportunity to worship, but also to create opportunities for Christians and others to engage in public action.

I know that this can be demanding and costly. I know also that we cannot evade the trajectory of the Good Samaritan in undertaking this.

Jesus told his parables to teach the nature of the kingdom of God of which the church is to be a first instalment, a kind of preview of the fuller coming attraction. The Good Samaritan takes us into the realm of community ministry –being alongside those who are really struggling, whose lives are difficult and who can themselves be difficult and fraught.

I have marvelled after hearing some people's life stories that they have survived. I can understand their diffidence in trusting and their anger, especially towards others whose lives seem so serene and plentiful. And their initial anger towards the Church which they think is their constant critic.

I am deeply conscious of the Asian theologian Raymond Fung who drew attention to the Church's preoccupation with sinners rather than with the sinned against. We ought to hold the balance and respond empathetically to those who are sinned against in our localities.

The development of community ministry can enable Christians and others, as community-theologian Ann Morisy indicates, 'to engage in a struggle which is wider than that of concern for our own well-being or that of our household. In this way it profoundly challenges the corrupted view of faith as something which primarily feeds our personal well-being. Commitment to struggle is an essential element of Christian maturity. The worst state of humankind is not our sinfulness, because a central tenet of our faith is that our sins can be forgiven; it is the cessation of struggle, since this is a rejection of the creation process in which we are called to participate by God.'¹

The context for understanding the Gospel and for understanding this parable of the Good Samaritan is a deep accurate appreciation of the context of our mission, our locality. We are not called by God to be a religious self-preservation society; we are called to imitate the self-giving and self-expending of the Lord Jesus Christ as agents of the emerging kingdom of God in our own localities.

In order to be open to the kingdom of God dimensions before us we need theological and missional leadership. Thankfully the Reverend Dan Connor brings both these gifts to you.

Dan is a very reflective priest whose heart aches that the love of God in Christ can be real for everyone.

Well, the 'everyone' has substantive definition for Dan and for you – it begins with your immediate neighbours and it imitates the Good Samaritan in solid community ministry that meets real needs with empathy, generosity and self-expending.

[A] Samaritan while travelling came near [the man who had been robbed, stripped and left half-dead]; and when he saw him, he was moved with [compassion].³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?³⁷ He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

¹ Ann Morisy. 1997. Beyond the Good Samaritan. London: Continuum, p. 19.