

Sunday 14th July 2013

St Barnabas, E17.

Theme: Good Samaritan: Who is my neighbour?

Not so long ago, I was asked to visit one of our neighbourhood primary schools and share something about “the church in action” with a class of ten and eleven year olds. I was pre-warned that they had been considering the story of the Good Samaritan and that they had prepared some very good questions, questions like “how do you help other people at St Barnabas Church?”

I was quite challenged but this task. “What are we doing?”, I asked. We have no food bank (although we are now supporting the local foodbank, - www.eatorheat.org), no shelter for homeless people, no drop-in for elderly people, no playgroup (even though we now have a pre-school in the hall), no counselling service, none of the those kinds of things often associated with the church serving its local community. But then I remembered our engagement in London Citizens [<http://www.citizensuk.org>] and how the methods of community organising have helped us transform our relationship with our local neighbourhood. I showed the children a video clip about CitySafe

[\[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS-KaJjQrpgand\]](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS-KaJjQrpgand) explained that we had set up a CitySafe scheme here in the Markhouse Ward where we now have a number of Safe Havens in local shops, cafes and public buildings, places where people can retreat for safety if they feel vulnerable. I explained this was, for us, a practical outworking of the story of the Good Samaritan - a story which is after all a story of a man being viciously mugged and robbed – a response by us to the issue of crime on our streets and the desire to establish a neighbourhood in which everyone feels safe. Of course, there is more to do on this and it's good that the Queens Boundary Community Organisation [\[http://queensboundary.wordpress.com/\]](http://queensboundary.wordpress.com/), which we have helped to start, is holding a meeting in our Foster Hall this afternoon on issues of community safety, to which all are welcome between 2-4pm.

That was my response to the school children, but I want to explore another aspect of the parable of the Good Samaritan this morning as I invite you to reflect on the core question which led Jesus to tell this story. A lawyer, asked Jesus which was the greatest of the commandments. Jesus reflects back the question and says the lawyer gives the answer that the greatest two are to love God and love your

neighbour. The lawyer then asks this question, “And who is my neighbour?”

“Who is my neighbour?” “Who are our neighbours?” It is to this question that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and what Jesus does in telling this parable is something to which it is worth us giving close attention.

The Samaritan’s actions are good, in that it is he who helps the wounded man, takes him to a place of comfort and protection and pays the innkeeper to take care of the wounded man’s needs. His actions are good in contrast to those who should have helped but did not do so. Both the priest and someone from a priestly family, a Levite, passed by on the other side, they simply ignored the wounded man and left him suffering, potentially leaving him to die. But why did Jesus choose a Samaritan in the telling of the story? Surely any other person would have done? If the story is about the failure of the holier-than-thou to help, any humble believer could have served to make the point. Jesus could have even picked a tax-collector or a prostitute to illustrate his story. He mentions them often enough and they would have made the point that those who we might have expected to serve their own economic interests were more ready to help than those whose special responsibility it was to

practice their religion in acts of loving service. But Jesus chooses a Samaritan as the Good person of the story and it is worth assuming that he did so quite deliberately.

Who were the Samaritans? I should really say “Who are the Samaritans?” for the Samaritans still exist today as an ethnic group within Israel/Palestine. Today their numbers are very small, under a thousand, but in Jesus’ day there were over one million Samaritans. They claim ancestry from Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh and although closely related to Judaism, the Samaritans have their own distinct religious customs. They claimed their religion was the true religion of Israel, preserved by those who were not taken off to exile in Babylon in the year 597BC. This claim led to intense rivalry between the Jews and Samaritans in Jesus’ day. That is one of the reasons why his disciples are shocked when Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. The Jews of Jesus’ day pretty much hated the Samaritans and so for Jesus to choose a Samaritan as the Good person of his parable is for Jesus to make a deliberate point about loving action for others transcending ethnic and religious divides.

So “who is our neighbour?” when we phrase this question in ethnic and religious terms? Last week I did a little

research into this question and it might interest you to know the results, at least as they appear from the statistics issued from the 2011 Census [<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=6508220&c=E17+7HA&d=27&e=13&g=6338751&i=1001x1003x1004&m=0&r=0&s=1373819490160&enc=1&dsFamilyId=2525&nsjs=true&nsck=false&nssvg=false&nswid=1280>]. According to those statistics, for the Markhouse Ward here, which is roughly coterminous with the parishes of St Barnabas and St Saviour's, the population here is just under 14,000. Religiously, just under 40% call themselves Christian, just over 32% Muslim, 2.3% Hindu, fewer than 1% call themselves Sikh, less than 1% Jewish, less than 1% Buddhist and nearly 17% say they have no religion. In terms of place of birth, we find that a bit over 7,000, a bit over half of that 14,000 were born in the UK, with other prominent groups being as follows: 2,336 born in the rest of Europe, 2,224 born in the middle east and Asia and 1, 031 born in Africa, 1,179 from Pakistan, 618 from Poland, 397 from the Caribbean, 110 from the Philippines, 109 from South America and 22 from Zimbabwe just to pick out some of the places represented in this congregation. Looking around today, I wish I had to hand the specific figures for other countries represented here this morning: Guyana, Trinidad, Barbados, Turkey, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Brazil, Dominica,

Jamaica and Ireland. This morning we are 15 countries from for continents represented here in church and that is just this morning.

I mention these statistics because it strikes me that we often talk of being multi-cultural in general without paying attention to being multi-cultural in particular. Many of those who are loudest in their defence of multi-culturalism are people whose relationships with people of other cultures are quite weak. I have been in meetings with people defending multi-culturalism where practically everyone there is white British. By contrast, we may not think of ourselves as embodying multi-culturalism when we come to church but this congregation and others like it in Walthamstow are some of the few places in our community where people of different cultures genuinely come together and make friends across cultural boundaries, where we genuinely embody what it means to answer the question “who is my neighbour?” The World in Walthamstow photo project [<http://www.walthamstowmigrantsaction.org.uk/8.html>] which many of you are aware, and is part of the Migrants Action’ Group we have been instrumental in forming, is an attempt to showcase the diversity of our community in particular and not just in general, to see how many people we can find here in Walthamstow to represent the nations of the world. So far

we are up to 107... and rising, we are, as I have said before, over half-way to the New Jerusalem.

I had two experiences yesterday which to me also embody something of the spirit of Jesus' parable. Standing at a bus-stop with an elderly white lady and seeing the bus come towards us driven by an Asian man, I was heartened when she said to me with real joy, "oh, its my favourite bus driver" and to see them greet each other warmly on the bus. And in the afternoon when I posted a photo on Facebook of my bike repairs in the garden, I was touched by a young Asian guy in the neighbourhood offering to help. It was a pity I saw his offer only after I had repaired the sixth puncture! Such instances, in the midst of everyday life in Walthamstow, reveal to me an outworking of the question "Who is my neighbour?" and I will try to remember them the next time I am summoned to a primary school to talk on the church in the community.

It is not just responding in practice to community need, as important as that is, and which we are seeking to do through CitySafe and other community initiatives, it is also making friendships beyond our own religious and ethnic boundaries that constitutes an outworking of the question "Who is my neighbour?" Some of you know that we were funded for a

CitySafe and Peace Garden
[<http://www.saintsaviourswalthamstow.co.uk/10.html>] **initiatives by the Near Neighbours Fund** [<http://www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours>] , a government pot of money which encourages people to work together in their communities. David Barclay, writing about Near Neighbours, in this essay, ‘Making multiculturalism work: enabling practical action across deep difference’
[<http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/publications/2013/06/19/making-multiculturalism-work>] suggests such projects enable the creation of what he calls “political friendships”, co-operation which puts the pursuit of the common good ahead of differences based on religion or ethnicity... but I suggest that these friendships are not necessarily only political, project-based or goal-driven but often genuine friendship fostered in the heart of enjoying difference and learning to live with multiple identities in the realities of complex social space. That’s my academic language for describing what we do here in this parish. Of course, we do not always get it right and I warm to Bishop Stephen’s response to the accusation “the church is full of hypocrites” that “there is always room for one more”... we do not always get it right, but what I am describing is an aspiration, often practiced, to be faithful to Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan and his

instruction to the lawyer and thereby to us, to “go and do likewise!”

Steven Saxby, July 2013.