

Ordinary Sunday 15C (13 July) 2025
Waiapu Cathedral

“To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ at St John’s Cathedral: grace to you and peace from God our Father. In our prayers for you we always thank God, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the saints.” Imagine receiving a letter like that – someone giving thanks for our faith and for the way we live it out. The writer’s connecting what the gospel has done in the lives of the Colossians with the way they’re living those lives on a daily basis. And he spells it out: the Colossians have received the good news of Christ, the word of the truth that’s come to them, and that word has borne fruit amongst them. They have hope laid up for them in heaven. They have love in the Holy Spirit. Reminders of what they have, all their strengths, all their resources, things that help them bear fruit.

And the fruit metaphors pile up, from the big picture of how the gospel has grown and borne fruit in the whole world, to what's been happening in *that* community: the good news of God's love and grace bearing fruit amongst them from the time they first heard and understood it. Past fruit, present fruit, and the hope for spiritual wisdom that will help them lead lives worthy of God and bear yet more fruit in the future. Whenever I read things like that I want to pause and wonder about the fruit I've been bearing lately – perhaps you're doing the same thing.

And did you notice how knowledge and actions are connected? There's a link between bearing fruit in doing good and growing in the knowledge of God. We can't isolate what we know from how we live, how we put our knowledge into practice. But why is it so hard to love the people who make us uncomfortable? That's one of the underlying issues in the parable Jesus tells.

An expert in the religious law asks Jesus a question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” I love how Jesus answers: “What’s written in the law, and how do you read it?” After all, the lawyer is well aware of what’s in the law, but this is going to be a debate about how the law is applied. Something I guess that resonates with the lawyers we know. He tells Jesus what the law says: love God and love your neighbour as yourself. So far, so good. But he goes on to ask, “And who is my neighbour?”

So Jesus tells one of his quirky stories, stories designed to make us think – and the very familiarity of this parable can blind us to how disturbing it is. A story of someone who was mugged and left for dead, and of three people who happened onto the scene. The first person to turn up was a priest. He was someone who also knew about the law. His area of professional expertise, if you want to put it that way, was how to love God with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind. He passed by on the other side. Because part of loving God was keeping God's commandments, and if the unfortunate victim was already dead, and the priest touched him, he'd become contaminated by death – unclean – and unable to offer the religious sacrifices. Unable to participate in worship on behalf of the people. So the priest avoids the contact, passes by on the other side.

And the Levite? A Levite was a lay assistant to the Temple hierarchy – sort of like our liturgists. And he doesn't stop either. He's got important duties to perform, he doesn't want to make himself unclean either, and he's aware of the danger. What if the robbers are still around, lying in wait for another victim? So he too keeps going. We miss the point of the story if we condemn the priest and the Levite too hard. The priest and the Levite act the same way a doctor might if she's preparing to perform an operation only she can do and sees a man on the side of the road who

might be already dead. This is triage, the sort of complex and sometimes painful ethical decisions that happen everyday. For them it was a choice between one duty and another duty, between one great commandment and another. And they chose loving God over loving their neighbour. Have we ever been in that position?

And we miss the point of Jesus' story if we aren't shocked by the ending. We so glibly call this parable "the Good Samaritan" and forget how appalling it would be for Jesus' original audience to have the words "good" and "Samaritan" next to each other in the same sentence. It's like saying the good Al Qaeda terrorist, the good meth dealer, the good homophobic troll on the internet.

Who would be the Samaritan for us today? Who's most different from us? Who do we see as social outcasts, as somehow unclean, as religiously inferior to us? Who does all the wrong things? Who would we least like to compare ourselves with? Because that's what's going on here. That's who Jesus is making the hero of the story, the one who shows the compassion that we maybe don't. The one who bears the cost of interrupting his journey, the cost of the medicines and the accommodation, and the riskiness of possibly being cheated by an unscrupulous innkeeper. The one who risks so much, and all for someone who, quite possibly, would have flinched from being helped by such a one.

It's a tough lesson we're invited to learn. When Jesus tells this story, and when we hear it again, something happens inside us. And it's like the prophet Amos – holding up a plumb line. A way to see if things measure up, to check on the structural integrity of a building, to see how it might hold up in an earthquake. When we listen to this story it feels like, somewhere inside us, a plumb line is being held up. Do we measure up – or are our hearts in need of some earthquake strengthening? Could we have done what the Samaritan did – reaching out to help someone who looked down on him? Could we have done what the man in the ditch did – accept help from someone he despised? Those aren't comfortable questions. They're not meant to be.

Who is my neighbour? The lawyer's question maybe implies there's someone who's not my neighbour, that we can put people into two columns: neighbours – whom we help, and who help us, and non-neighbours – whom we can safely ignore. Who was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? Jesus' story says there's no-one who's not my neighbour. That a neighbour isn't defined by blood ties, or nationality, or religious affiliation, or by being "someone like us." Neighbours are defined by those who need help, and those who give it. And sometimes our neighbour is the person we'd least expect.

So, who proved to be a neighbour to the man who was beaten and left for dead? Jesus turns the lawyer's question inside out — not "*Who is my neighbour?*" but "*Will I be a neighbour?*" And in doing so, he teaches us that in God's community, everyone is our neighbour — especially the person we'd rather avoid. Loving our neighbour isn't optional — it's the clearest expression of our love for God. So let's pray that we might continue to live lives that reflect that love: lives that bear fruit in every good work, that grow in wisdom and grace, and show God's kindness to every person we meet — no exceptions. Because in the end, loving your neighbour *is loving your God*.

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