

Have you ever been asked an awkward question, and you don't know quite how to answer it? "I picked up this dress today – it was a real bargain, what do you think?" "Does this beard suit me?" "So tell me, why did you do that?" I'm sure the list could go on, and I'm sure there are many questions that you either wish someone hadn't asked you, or that you wish you hadn't asked someone else.

Today's gospel reading starts with a question from someone trying to be really clever. It was asked by someone described as a lawyer – now that would not have been a lawyer as we might know one today, but an expert in what is called Mosaic law – the law of the Jewish people as laid down by Moses, and recorded in what we now call the Old Testament of the Bible. And it was not just any question – it was a question designed to trick Jesus into saying something that the Jewish establishment could use against Jesus as evidence towards the death sentence that they are trying to achieve for Jesus. And the exchange that takes place between Jesus and the lawyer leads to one of the most famous parables that Jesus used to explain what he meant.

But first that question. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Well, that's quite a question isn't it. What he is basically asking is, "How do I get into heaven?" But the thing about trick questions is you need to already know the answer – or at least think you do. And Jesus is happy to play along with the lawyer.

"What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" The lawyer answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" This would have been exactly the answer Jesus expected. It was the summary of the ten commandments included in the Old Testament books of Exodus and Leviticus. Jesus knew the man was a lawyer, and that his answer would come from scripture.

So Jesus in effect congratulates him and brings the conversation to a close. "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." "What must I do to inherit eternal life? Do this and you will live." But the lawyer wasn't finished and had another go, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" And this is the lawyer showing his true colours. He is confident that he already will inherit eternal life – he has given the answers which he is required to give. He loves God with all his heart, soul strength and mind according to what is written in the law, and he says that he loves his neighbour as himself – but he is saying that without knowing who his neighbour is – hence he asks the question. In effect what is happening is he is saying that he loves those people who he sees as being his neighbours – and that is his narrow group of colleagues – let's face it, it doesn't include Jesus and his followers. In fact he has become so self centred in his life that he is failing the test of the second half of God's commandments – that you should love your neighbour – that is not just one person but it is each and every person that you come across – as yourself. So, to try and justify his self righteousness, he asks Jesus that second question, "and who is my neighbour?"

And to answer it, to condemn that self-righteousness, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Parables were not true stories. They did not tell us about actual events. They were stories that Jesus made up to make a point. And this parable is often misunderstood by people today.

It is a story of a man who was beaten up and left to die. It is a story of how two people of whom you would expect better, seeing the man lying there chose to walk past and not help him. It is a story of the most unlikely person helping the man in an unbelievably generous way. And the man who helped was an enemy of the other three characters in the story; he was a man from Samaria, a people who had chosen hundreds of years earlier to intermarry with the Assyrians when the Assyrians had captured Israel and that was in defiance of the Jewish law as is written in the book of Deuteronomy.

So it would appear to be a story about social justice; about how we should help people who are in trouble; about how we should support people who through no fault of their own have fallen on hard times; how we shouldn't discriminate between people based on their country of origin. Actually, it's none of those. It is a parable that is designed to knock this lawyer out of his self-righteousness.

Let's have a look at the parable.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a well known dangerous route, and the man who is the central character of the story, was attacked by thieves. We know nothing about the man, because we don't need to know anything more about him – that is an important point about Jesus' parables, he only includes what we need to know – and if something is included we should be able to learn something from it. So the man is in a pretty sorry state, probably dying if no-one comes to his helps, and a priest comes along, and passes by without doing anything. Well, that's not going to help Jesus' case against the lawyer is it? The priest should surely know that he is called to help the stranger – and he chooses not to, so is that not one point to the lawyer as the priest in Jesus' story decided this poor man need not be included in his neighbours? Well no – what Jesus is saying is that because the priest knew exactly what he should be doing and chose not to he is failing in his job – he may well love Jesus, but is choosing not to love his neighbour – and so is very similar to the lawyer.

And then the scene is repeated with the Levite. A Levite was like an assistant to the priests: one of their main roles was to maintain the temple. And he should have known what God would have expected of him and also failed to live up to those expectations.

Finally, along comes the Samaritan. The Samaritan who is an enemy to the injured man – and who would be seen as the same to our lawyer. He finds the man stripped, presumably down to his under garments, and bleeding. The Samaritan bandaged him – would he have had bandages with him – sounds unlikely – so he probably used some of his own clothing to make bandages. Did he have water to clean him with – it sounds like even if he did he did not consider that enough so he poured oil and wine on the wounds. That may sound odd but oil and wine were the liquids used in making sacrifices in those days and so would not only have had medicinal but spiritual healing properties. Then he took him to an inn – not a posh hotel, but it would have been a roadside lodging. And he paid for his care. He gave the innkeeper 2 denarii – that was a whole day's wage. We also know that this sort of inn would charge about 1/32 of a denarii for a day's stay so this was money for two month's accommodation. A massive act of generosity, with the commitment for more.

And then, after the parable, Jesus' final question: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The answer is as clear as Jesus could make it. The lawyer replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

And to complete Jesus' point, what he is saying is not – go and help anyone you possibly can, although we clearly should do that, but, "Make sure you include everyone in your list of neighbours.

So, this parable is not about social justice. It is not about giving money to poor people. It is not about, as some people have suggested, making you feel guilty about running away when someone needs help. It is about loving God perfectly, and realising that. The lawyer believed he loved God perfectly already – but he was only doing half the job. Taking the approach the lawyer was taking means following all those Mosaic laws perfectly, and accepting everyone in every situation as your neighbour consistently all the time – and that is clearly not going to happen – however hard we try.

So this parable is about accepting that we cannot love God perfectly – but that is absolutely fine. When we go to God and say to him that we want him to be part of our lives, he doesn't respond with a list of

entry requirements. He is just pleased that we want him in our lives and he accepts us knowing that we are all far from perfect. And when we accept God into our lives we feel the warmth of his love in our hearts, and we then want to try to do our best to follow the example that Jesus laid before us. When we see people suffering we want to try and help – but we can't always do that, and that is absolutely fine. When we do things wrong, God will forgive us. That is what St Paul meant when he said in his letter to the Romans that we are justified by faith not by our actions. The message that Jesus was trying to get across to the lawyer in his parable, and the message he tries to get across to us today here in Fowlmere, is, "Believe in me, accept me in your lives, and the rest will follow."

Amen