



*The Good Samaritan: Justin O'Brien*

## “Like being dragged through a bush backwards”: hints of the shape of conversion’s adventure

*James Alison, Talk for Charles Sturt University, Canberra, 14th September 2010.*

It is a very great honour to have been asked by you to share some thoughts about conversion in your midst. I thought I would try open the matter up by means of reading the parable of the Good Samaritan with you, since I think that it plunges us directly in ‘medias res’.

The context of the parable gives us a good frame:

*Just then a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

“Inheriting eternal life”, is a more interesting phrase than it might seem to those of us whose first reaction is that it is a simply another way of saying “what must I do to go to heaven?” Inheriting is what the ultimate insiders did (in those days, sons, but not daughters) and “eternal life” was a way of referring to the life of God. So we might say that what we are about to embark on is a discussion of what it looks like to become an insider in the life of God. Anyhow, the challenge is on: what sort of complex answer will Jesus come up with?

In fact Jesus remits the lawyer to something entirely non-esoteric, something entirely public and available to any listener:

*He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?”*

Knowing perfectly well that the texts of the law can be made to say many things, Jesus asks the lawyer not only what the text says, but also how he interprets the law. And the lawyer answers very properly, not by quoting a single text, but by putting together two texts from two different books of the Torah. First from Deuteronomy 6, 5, where it says:

*... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*

And then from Leviticus 19, 18 where it says:

*... you shall love your neighbour as yourself*

So the lawyer makes an act of legal interpretation, bringing together two laws in such a way that they interpret each other. What it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God is to be stretched towards God with every faculty of your being, and the form this takes is being stretched towards your neighbour.

Jesus commends the lawyer. He is not only a good lawyer, he has a good moral sense as well, since he has made an act of

interpretation which, while it was probably not innovative, is, in the different variants in which it has reached us, definitive: he has turned two different commandments into one single commandment which will in fact never be abrogated. Henceforth being on the inside of the life of God and being stretched lovingly towards my neighbour can never be separated. This is not merely a moralistic matter, but shows a firm anthropological insight: because we are reflexive animals, our only access to being loved is through loving someone else.

*And Jesus said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this, and you will live."*

The lawyer however wanted to take the matter further:

*But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"*

I wonder what Luke means that he wanted to justify himself? It's a curious phrase, and the sentiment occurs several times in this Gospel with the sense of a person who wants to make themselves good in their own eyes. Here it is not clear whether the lawyer thought he was asking a difficult question and was expecting a more complex answer. Perhaps he was rather underwhelmed when Jesus, having drawn from him a fairly succinct answer to his own question, simply commended him. Imagine: you try to challenge someone with a potentially complex technical question and clearly, by your demeanour and style, expect a detailed answer which will flatter you for being intelligent as well as expose possible weak flanks in your interlocutor's approach to things. Your interlocutor hears you out, and then, after a deep-looking pause simply answers, "Yes, I agree". Well, it takes the wind out of your sails, and your colleagues giggle at you, the class clever-clogs who tried to catch teacher out, but ended up firmly but gently put in their place.

Or maybe the point of the lawyer's original question – literally "doing what will I inherit eternal life? – was that he wanted an answer that gave him a specific "what's the legal minimum necessary?" In other words, when Luke says that the lawyer wanted to justify himself, maybe what he wanted was a more immediately applicable answer to his question, the sort of instruction that someone can "get right", fill in the right boxes, thereby becoming one of the good guys. So an answer that sets out the overall framework, but leaves a huge field for the hard work of interpretation and application to life situations, is not what he wanted.

In any case, the lawyer has a follow-up question, and it is by no means stupid. He is not merely asking Jesus to be more specific; he is asking a reasonable legal question about the interpretation of Leviticus 19, whence the second part of his own answer had been drawn. For the verse from which the lawyer had produced the phrase "and your neighbour as yourself" contains more than the part he had quoted.

In full it reads:

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

Here, the word "neighbour" appears to refer to "the sons of your own people" – fellow Hebrews. What makes the lawyer's question legally interesting is not that the bit of Leviticus which he quotes has a circumscribed meaning, but precisely the reverse: it is the fact that a few verses later in the same chapter of Leviticus, following on a number of commandments to do with intermingling of cattle, sex with slaves, hair trimming, witchcraft, and respect for old age, we get the following:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you

shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

So Leviticus appears to interpret itself, for the same phrase “you shall love him as yourself” which was previously applied to the word “neighbour” here acquires a new density: the stranger who sojourns among you is declared to be the exact legal equivalent of one of the “sons of your own people”, and therefore a neighbour in the strict sense of the commandment. In other words, the text of Leviticus seems to be heading in the direction of the term “neighbour” becoming universal, and that is worrying legally, since if everyone is your neighbour, then the term “neighbour” has no longer got any precise legal meaning at all, and how are you to know if you are obeying a commandment when it has no precise meaning?

So, it appears that our lawyer is actually asking Jesus to interpret Leviticus, urging him to flesh out the relationship between being on the inside of the life of God and the discussion concerning applicable forms of neighbourliness. And Jesus agrees to take the matter on.

*And taking him up, Jesus said...*

The Greek is interesting, in that of the possible words or phrases for “reply”, the one used is not the more contestatory, “in your face” sort of reply, but rather the kind that a legal authority would give who had agreed to take on the matter. In other words, Jesus is not here showing the lawyer up. Rather he’s saying, “OK, you’re on. Let’s see where we can take this”. The parable that follows is his acceptance of the challenge simultaneously to show what it is like to be on the inside of the life of God and to interpret Leviticus well in the matter of the neighbour. Let us read it:

*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went*

*away, leaving him half dead.*

So, here is the setting. The man is unspecified. It is not evident that he was a Hebrew. Merely that he was a human. Whatever sort of human he was, he fell into the hands of people who did not discriminate between “sons of your people” and “sojourners in your land” – they were disobedient to Leviticus under any of its interpretations. Their proximity to him was of entirely the wrong sort.

*Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*

I particularly like the word “by chance”. It too forms part of the answer to the question. Nothing in Jesus’ story is stable, or ordered, everything is fluid and contingent. Whatever the teaching to be derived from this parable, it will be to do with navigating the fluxes not of what should be, but of what just happens. The priest was, as it happens, going down the road. Interestingly, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is downhill, so the priest was in fact going away from Jerusalem, and towards Jericho. In other words, he wasn’t on his way to his Temple duties in Jerusalem. And the text doesn’t tell us anything about the psychology of his motivation in passing by on the other side. It doesn’t say that he was disgusted, or a coward, or in a hurry. Merely that he was a priest and that, seeing the wounded one, he passed by on the other side.

There were in fact perfectly respectable reasons for a priest to pass by. The man had been left half dead, and that means that it would not be obvious, without going close to him, and perhaps turning him over, whether he were dead or not. In any case, there was certainly shed blood all over the place. And if you were a priest, you had very important professional reasons to avoid being close to a corpse, or to spilled

blood. In fact, central to the whole holiness code and the life of the Holy of Holies in the Temple was that it was a place utterly removed from death. The priests, whose ordination included the notion of a “resurrection” by which they became sharers in angelic life, must have nothing to do with corpses, blood, other than that of sacrificial beasts, or corruption. Indeed, a priest’s ability to serve God in the Holy Place would have been severely impaired, and he would have to undergo a complicated series of ablutions, if he had touched an unclean thing. All this is set out in Leviticus 21 and 22, not at all far from our passage.

So the Priest and similarly, but to a lesser extent, the Levite, both had quite solid motives for giving a wide berth to the potential corpse by the side of the road. The potential corpse either might, or definitely would, impede their service of God. In fact, it was an obstacle to being on the inside of the life of God as enacted liturgically in the Holy Place. You can imagine them, maybe without any personal sense of disgust, or fear of corpses, or any psychological issues to do with hygiene and contagion, thinking, entirely in good conscience: “I do hope someone else comes by soon to attend to the poor fellow, if it isn’t already too late for him – and in fact if the mobile ‘phone had been invented, I would call a non-priestly friend for back-up – but it hasn’t been yet, and my role in life is clear: my job is to serve God in his Holy Place, and share in his life by my anointed service, and I shouldn’t let this accident, this unfortunate happenstance, upset the true order of the world, the unruffled stability in which the Almighty rejoices, and which it is my job to help promote, so, I’d better pass by on the other side”.

Then along comes the Samaritan:

*But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved*

*with pity.*

Now the interesting thing about the Samaritan, is that he is not, from the perspective of the Jewish lawyer, the totally outside “other” – a complete foreigner. He occupies the even more infuriating place of being exactly the wrong sort of other: the one who is sufficiently like us to get us all riled up – a classic trigger for the reaction produced by the narcissism of minor differences. The Samaritans after all, worshipped the same God, with a slightly different, but overlapping, set of Scriptures. They didn’t acknowledge Jerusalem as a sacred centre, worshipping instead on Mount Gerizim. So, Jews and Samaritans were a perpetual reproach to each other, sources of reciprocal moral infuriation. Just a few verses earlier in St Luke’s Gospel, some Samaritan villagers had refused hospitality to members of Jesus’ group, because they were heading towards Jerusalem, pilgrimage style (Lk 9, 52-3). The hospitality which would undoubtedly have been shown to ordinary travellers was suspended for ideological travellers. Which is why, I guess, it may be important here that neither the Priest, the Levite nor the Samaritan is headed for their respective holy place. While both the Priest and the Levite were heading away from Jerusalem, the text doesn’t say which way the Samaritan was going, up or down, and it clearly doesn’t matter. The question of being on the inside of the life of God is here entirely abstracted from any question about the right place, the right cult.

And yet, immediately the Samaritan draws near him, we get the parable’s bombshell word: εσπλαγχνισθη – which our translation gives as “was moved with pity”. In fact the word is much stronger than that. It means “viscerally moved” and so is much more like our English “was gutwrenched”.

What is important here, is that this is the Greek form of the word by which

God was described as viscerally moved, moved in the entrails or the womb. In other words, right there, in the midst of this happenstance, what it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God has burst forth.

And what it looks like is an entirely different relation to a potential or actual corpse than might have been expected. The priest who had kept himself pure for sacrifice might well find himself in the Temple alongside the corpse of an animal that he had just sacrificed. He might even, depending on which feast it was, find himself having to eat the entrails of the animal in question. For it was the entrails that were known as “the portion of the Lord”. By eating them, the priest would be taking part in the life of God. Yet here it is the entrails, the life of God, which burst forth towards the utterly vulnerable victim by the side of the road, in the flesh of the Samaritan who is moved towards him.

*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.*

So, first of all, he moves close to him, instead of away from him, and then using oil to soothe the wounded flesh, and wine which was the basic disinfectant of the period, he bandages the half-dead one, and brings him to an inn. Once he gets to the inn, please notice what he doesn't do. Neither he nor the text make any reference to the ethnicity of the wounded one. He doesn't say to the innkeeper: “Look, I found one of yours on the side of the road, and have done far more than my bit by bringing him here, but now he's your responsibility” – something a foreigner might easily say to a co-national of the wounded one. On the contrary, even being with him in the inn, the Samaritan doesn't pass the buck, but continues to take care of him.

*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.”*

Come the next day, and the Samaritan still doesn't distance himself from the wounded one. Even when he is going to be physically distant about his business, he leaves a generous first instalment with the innkeeper – two days wages – and pledges himself to make good an opened debt, for who can foresee the time necessary for healing, and the possible expenses to be incurred as the result of wounds sustained? In fact, the Samaritan becomes an indefinitely extended source of invisible succour for the wounded one, working through the local ministrations of the innkeeper.

Jesus then addresses the lawyer:

*“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”*

And even here, his phrasing is most suggestive. The lawyer had asked him “Who is my neighbour?” with the implication that the term “neighbour” referred to the passive object of mandated benevolence: “if we can define who my neighbour is, then I will know towards whom I am obligated to behave in a neighbourly way”. But Jesus has it the other way round: the word neighbour refers not to the passive object of the benevolence, mandated or not, but to the active creator of neighbourliness. A further hint that he is answering the question “what is it like to be on the inside of the life of God”?

The lawyer, again very exactly, and without any reference to the ethnic issues involved, answers Jesus:

*He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”*

It is interesting that the lawyer uses a different word for mercy than the one Jesus used. Where Jesus refers to the gutwrenching entrails, the lawyer uses the

word ελεως . And, as is typical in Luke, this ordinary word for mercy, or act of compassion, also points beyond itself. For it is the word in the Greek version of Hosea 6,6:

For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings

There the Greek word ελεως translates the Hebrew word for “loving kindness” – chesed – a different, but equally powerful “take” on the inner life of God. Any doubt as to whether Luke’s use of this word here is intentional is removed when we glance at the parallel passage in St Mark’s Gospel (Mk 12 32-33), where there is no parable of the Good Samaritan, and it is a Scribe, not a lawyer who is Jesus’ interlocutor. There it is Jesus who answers the Scribe by linking the two commandments, and the Scribe who commends Jesus saying:

“You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; 33 and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

So in Luke it does rather look as though the lawyer understood Jesus’ parable as being his “fleshing out” of Hosea 6,6. And Jesus ends his teaching by giving the lawyer the answer which the lawyer was by now probably dreading:

*Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”*

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