

Samaritan or Levite

When someone asks me what Christianity is all about,
it is the one parable in the Gospels
that I think about
because I think
this is it.

Christopher William Jones
Listen Pilgrim

To love tenderly – Micah’s second blueprint for discipleship
how simple a command yet how difficult to obey, for the
suffering are a bottomless pit of longing. They long for
healing, for wholeness, for comfort, for affirmation, for love.
it is in the nature of man that we can only satisfy these needs
for a few hours, perhaps a day, and then we must return with
more comfort, more assurance, more love. Truly we must
repeat ourselves and must go round and round in circles of
loving until we are dizzy and exhausted.

Perhaps it is in this endless circular dance of loving that
we begin to learn humility, for the more we love the more we
see how far we fall short of people’s needs. Paradoxically it
is our very success that reveals to us the extent of our failure.
The human heart is ever hungry, and we have pitifully little
to meet its needs. But the great joke is that if we are foolish
enough to attempt to feed the five thousand we will learn the
truth of the saying, ‘Love is like a basket of loaves and fishes:
you never have enough until you start to give it away’
(Anon.).

But it takes a lifetime to learn that sort of wisdom, and
most of the time we find ourselves holding back for fear that
we do not have the resources to meet a particular need. Like
the wretched Levite, we find ourselves averting our eyes and

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hurrying by on the other side of the road. It happened to me
not very long ago.

I had gone to London in the hope of negotiating a grant
from the Cancer Research Campaign to fund a clinical
psychologist who would teach counselling and communi-
cation skills. My vision was that we would be able to improve
the care of the dying in our local hospitals if nurses and junior
doctors were trained how to break bad news and generally
cope better with distressed patients and their families. As
always I was a little late and I hurried down Picadilly on my
way to the CRC offices. As I jostled my way through the
crowd I noticed a man lying on the pavement. I stopped
about twenty yards away and looked. He seemed to be alive
and there was no sign of haemorrhage. Standing above him
was a very young and embarrassed security guard from one
of the big stores, clutching a walkie-talkie machine in his
hand and obviously waiting for assistance. The people passed
by, apparently oblivious. I stood my ground. Should I go up
and declare myself a doctor? Should I go and kneel down by
the man and ask him what was wrong – try to comfort him?
I felt I should do both these things – but I did neither. I felt
a great distaste for being involved medically in that situation
at that precise moment. It would make me late for my
meeting; I might be expected to go to the hospital with him
in an ambulance. Maybe he would suddenly stop breathing
and I would have to struggle with trying cardiac massage
and mouth to mouth respiration. Eventually I convinced
myself that the security guard had everything in hand and
went on my way. After about five minutes I came to Leicester
Square and realised that I had been walking in the wrong
direction. Crossly, I retraced my steps only to find that the
man was still there. I stopped again. He seemed to be in good
colour. Someone had put a blanket over him. The security
guard still towered over the sad prone figure crumpled under
a makeshift blanket. Then as I wrestled with my conscience,
an ambulance screamed around the corner and I felt free to
escape. I walked away feeling really dirty – and in many ways
I still do. I do not propose to make any excuses or even search
for explanations: I think the story can stand alone as a sort
of anti-parable – an example of the frailty of human beings,
of how a professional Samaritan can suddenly find that he or
she is, for today, behaving like a Levite. Brooding about it,

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I found myself a little comforted when I remembered a passage from the American poet Christopher William Jones's *Listen Pilgrim*. Jones, now an Episcopalian monk, uses a vivid prose poetry to drive home the devastating message of Matthew 25:45 'in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me'. Here we meet him at his visionary best devastated by the awareness of Christ in the gutters of New York:

Coming out of Memorial Church one day,
in Greenwich Village on Washington Square in New York,
I saw a bum

standing in the middle of the street.
Four or five men, two or three women,
all dressed very properly, some with
important looking attaché cases,
passed him, pretending they did not see him,
bumping into him,
pushing aside his stretched hand;
and I followed them.

And I still think that
for me
this was sin,
because there was this Lord and God
of mine and yours,

dirty,
smelling
like the lavatory in which he slept
that night,
filthy, despairing, drunk,
and demanding - not humbly asking, but demanding -
money.

Who was he to demand?

Christopher William Jones
Listen Pilgrim

The more I try to write about caring, the more I find myself in a state of interior muddle and conflict. I know how I *should* be acting - and yet I do not always do it! Like St Paul, I want to howl: 'I cannot understand my own behaviour, I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate' (Rom. 7:15).

'What am I?' I ask myself, 'Samaritan or Levite?' At first

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sight it is always so easy to identify the goodies and the baddies. In my world the goodies are the gentle, loving, compassionate doctors and nurses who, when asked to come and see someone out of hours, say, 'Of course, no problem, I'll be around as soon as I can' - and the baddies are those who will not come, or if they do come are surly or pompous or unfriendly. And yet I find myself all too frequently playing both parts: goodie on the bright sunny days when I have slept well or am not too hassled; but baddie on the other, too frequent, dark days when I am tired and overburdened and desperately in need of a little time out. There seems an appalling gulf between what I preach and what I practise, a massive shortfall on Jesus' counsel of perfection: 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:27). This, of course, 'the greatest commandment', is a summary of the Law and the Prophets. The first injunction regarding worship comes from Deuteronomy: 'Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one Yahweh. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart' (Deut. 6:4-6).

This verse which forms the words of the Shema, a prayer still central to Jewish worship, gives us the key to the possibility of the second half of the commandment: 'you must love your neighbour as yourself'. This second part of the quotation comes from a passage in Leviticus where Yahweh provides a detailed moral code for the sons of Israel, telling them, when you gather the harvest of your land, do not strip the fields bare. Leave a little at the edges so that when you have gone home with your crop and the poor come creeping in at dusk, there is something left over for them. And when you harvest your grapes, leave a few bunches on the vine. Do not be too eager to gather up the fallen fruit. You do not really need it, so why not leave it for those who do, for those who have no money to buy food from the shops and for the weary traveller, parched with the dust of the road. Do not be mean or greedy, over-protective of your own rights. More than anything, do not be a dog in the manger, destroying what you do not need. You must leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am Yahweh your God.

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It is not just the farmers who get told how to behave; the law of the Lord extends into the heart of the city. Employers must be fair and just and take care of their workers, not hanging on to their wages until the last possible minute; and businessmen must be honest in their affairs. Insider trading is definitely out and judges must be impartial in their rulings. No area of life is overlooked and the call to justice is unequivocal. But the law does not end at justice, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We must not hate, even when there is good reason, or we take the other's sin upon ourselves. When we have been wronged we must take no vengeance, but forgive. To put it in a nutshell, God says: 'You must love your neighbour as yourself. I am Yahweh.' Of course, it is that last phrase that is so hard to swallow and to live out: the loving of neighbour as self. The lawyer in Luke 10 tried to catch Jesus out by asking him 'and who is my neighbour?' but Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan showed him clearly that there can be no boundaries to loving, that the person needing love at that particular moment was an outsider and it was in fact an outsider who took compassion on him. He who was neighbour to the injured man was the man on the spot who, without thought for his own convenience and safety, perceived a need and acted on it with the resources available to him. He did not say, as he might legitimately have done, 'I am too busy; maybe he is faking and will jump on me; it's no good my stopping because I would not know what to do; the ambulance will be along in a minute. No. He stopped and did what he could. And we are bade to go and do the same.'

The lesson for me and for all of us about stopping to attend to the injured in our path is an obvious one - though as my own sad little experience shows, it is all too easy to be a Levite. How are we twentieth-century Christians to take this story? Am I being absurdly fundamentalist in dwelling upon it like this? Or is this commandment indeed pivotal in our discipleship: should we professional carers be struggling to love our patients as ourselves? In recent years I have, from time to time, been cast in the role of patient rather than doctor and the experience has been salutary. It has made me acutely aware of how the medical system, of which I am a part, can unconsciously hurt those it sets out to heal.

As in all the areas of caring which I have explored, there

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is need for an understanding of both points of view, a tempering of criticism with compassion. A couple of years ago I attended a gynaecological clinic. As is the custom, I was asked to undress and don a hospital dressing gown. Thus decently clad, but divested of most of my dignity, I was ushered into the clinic. The doctor pleasantly bade me sit down and asked what the trouble was. Frozen to my chair, I looked at him and then at the nurse who stood beside him. She turned her back on me and began to busy herself with some papers as if to say, 'don't mind me'. But I *did* mind her - most dreadfully. The idea of having to discuss my symptoms with the doctor was bad enough, but that there should be a third party listening-in was too much. I felt horribly humiliated and muttered that I could not talk in front of the nurse. The doctor feigned not to hear or understand and I stumbled on as best I could. Now, as it happens, my problems were not particularly embarrassing and I am not unduly shy: I just found it awful to have no privacy, and even more awful to be made to feel a fool because I was making a fuss.

It was this experience that first set me thinking about the way we professionals handle people in outpatients clinics. Nearly all patients who come to hospital clinics experience a degree of anxiety. They are worried about being unwell, anxious about what will be found and concerned that they will irritate the doctor who is so clever and so busy. They fear too that they will look a fool because they cannot explain themselves clearly. In most clinics however, instead of helping people to feel at ease, we divest them of their carefully chosen clothes, thereby reducing their sense of being a 'proper person'. Then, when we have rendered them even more vulnerable, we expect them to discuss their intimate problems and expose their bodies in the presence of strangers. And if then they exhibit their anxiety we write them off as being neurotic! Perhaps all nurses and doctors should 'role play' being a patient every couple of years. They should learn what it feels like to be wheeled down the corridor on a stretcher in a paper hat, to have the various 'routine' investigations; they should know that having blood tests is sometimes very painful, and that having metal instruments inserted into various bodily orifices can be very unpleasant indeed. More than anything, they should remember how horrid it is to feel foolish or misunderstood and that the fear of being thought

neurotic is often worse than the finding of a genuine pathology! If I am outspoken in my criticism of the way doctors and nurses handle patients, it must be remembered that I speak from the inside, and that I am often as guilty as my colleagues of causing distress; I, like them, am caught up in a complex pattern of behaviour which is conditioned by years of tradition and a very genuine shortage of human and material resources. One of my colleagues sees fifty women with breast cancer in a single clinic. Even with two or three doctors helping him, it is impossible that he should see each patient fully clothed. It is likewise impossible that he should ask her how she feels about the disease, how her husband is reacting to her mutilation, how she feels in her spirits. It is no wonder that recent research shows that many cases of severe anxiety, depression and psychological disturbance are being missed in women with breast cancer. The doctors are so busy attending to the physical side of their patient's disease that they pay scant attention to the psychological issues. As one gynaecologist said to me recently about sexual dysfunction: 'that's a whole Pandora's box I'd rather not open'.

Sick people are not called 'patients' for nothing. It is as well for us carers that they will put up with endless pain and indignity and still be grateful to us for doing our best. Again and again it comes home to me that we professionals are a frail and wounded race; like G. K. Chesterton in his *Hymn for the Church Militant*, we can sing:

Great God, that bowest sky and star,
Bow down our towering thoughts to thee,
And grant us in a faltering war
The firm feet of humility.

Lord, we that snatch the swords of flame,
Lord, we that cry about thy ear,
We too are weak with pride and shame,
We too are as our foe-men are.

Yea we are mad as they are mad,
Yea we are blind as they are blind,
Yea we are very sick and sad
Who bring good news to all mankind.

Holy Thursday

When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes again Jesus went back to the table. 'Do you understand' he said 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.' (John 13:12-15)

I spent Easter at L'Arche, a community of handicapped people and their helpers, which lies in the French village of Trosly Breuil on the edge of the forest outside Compiègne. The community, which began in 1964 with two handicapped men and a gentle French Canadian called Jean Vanier, is now home to two hundred men and women, handicapped and helpers, who live together in *foyers*, ordinary houses, in groups of anything from ten to twenty. As an outsider with little French I often find it difficult to distinguish between carers and handicapped, for the boundaries are frequently blurred. Perhaps the most important thing that L'Arche has taught me is that labels are of little consequence, for we are all wounded, handicapped in some way or another. Having long feared to come to L'Arche because I thought I could not cope with the mentally handicapped, I find myself absurdly at home, recognising for the first time that I too am handicapped, hurt and maimed from birth and by circumstance and that this is an acceptable way of being a person.

On Holy Thursday we celebrated the liturgy of the institution of the Eucharist and washing of the feet. I have a deep love of these Holy Week services and for many years have spent the Easter Triduum at Ampleforth, a Benedictine monastery in the North of England where the monks open their doors to share their prayer with a large number of lay people like me. On Holy Thursday night the abbot and a