Luke 10:25-37

Celebrating the Queen’s 90th Birthday

So today we mark the 90th birthday of a quite remarkable woman: Her Majesty the Queen. We join with millions of others today, in this nation and throughout the Commonwealth to thank God for her life and witness and the way in which she has led this nation over many decades.

Some of us come here today with a deep love for the monarchy, whilst others of us come with deeply held Republican convictions that question the need for the institution of the monarchy. But these debates are not even on the agenda of today’s celebrations. Because regardless of what position we hold with regard to monarchy as institution, we can all unite around the fact that our Queen has been a strong, steadfast, courageous and upright leader of our nation, with a strong moral compass and deeply held Christian convictions that have informed her servant-ministry to this nation and the Commonwealth.

Queen Elizabeth is a quite remarkable woman, a quite remarkable monarch, who has served her people with quiet dignity and strength of character and walked with her subjects through extraordinary turmoil and social upheaval over many, many decades.

As constitutional Head of the Church of England, she has been informed by her deep-rooted faith and has allowed the wind of change to sweep through the Church of England without allowing us to abandon the tenets and pillars of our faith.

Today, we join together to thank God for her wisdom and the way in which she has directed this nation and the Commonwealth with fortitude and compassion.

I think we would all agree that the Queen has, to no small degree, shaped the national character of our nation. Governments come and go, Prime Ministers come and go, Bishops and Archbishops come and go - but the Queen has been a point of stability for this nation for decades and her ministry to the nation has shaped who we are to a large degree.

And, of course, the Queen’s Christian faith has led her to do what she can to influence her Governments to work towards building a society based on the values of care and compassion, social justice and equality for all. We still have a long way to go - and there are periods of our history when we seem to be going backwards rather than forwards in the pursuit of social justice. But nevertheless, that ideal is part of the DNA of our nation and, to no small degree, we have the influence of the Queen to thank for that.

The pursuit of social justice is a key component of our national psyche and it is a key component of the core values of the Christian faith. We are seeking to be a Mission-Shaped Church here at St. Andrew’s and we base all our activities on the Five Marks of Mission, which are listed in the pewsheet. And Mark 4, as we know, is to challenge the unjust structures of society and do what we can to eradicate social injustice in whatever form that takes: racism, homophobia, homelessness, poverty and so forth, whilst doing what we can to support the most vulnerable members of society. In John’s first letter, we are exhorted to live in God’s love but in chapter 3, he writes this: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” The pursuit of social justice is the natural outworking of our Christian faith. If we do not pursue social justice, we do not adequately live out the faith.

And that, of course, was the example of Jesus to us in the way in which he showed care and compassion to those on the margins of society and found value and worth in every human being, regardless of gender or race or confession of faith. And in his teaching, he exhorted us to follow his example. He did that in many places and at many times - but not least through this parable that we have heard this morning that we now call the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The story of the Good Samaritan is very familiar to us. But it is an important story because it has an uncomfortable resonance with how our society is today.

Jesus is responding to a question from a religious leader of the day who has asked what we must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus reminds him of what the Jewish law says to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbour as ourselves. But then, in verse 29, we get this interesting verse that seems so contemporary for today. It says this: ‘But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”’

The religious leader wanted to justify himself…

Wherever we stand on the EU Referendum debate, I am sure that most of us will agree that the quality of the debate itself has been really poor, with claims and counter-claims coming from both sides and a reliance on fear, exaggerations, and some very doubtful statistics. And whilst a lot of that has been to do with economic projections, a great deal of that has been stirring up fear about immigration too.

I’ve spoken a lot in the past about the shifts in societies around the world that are resulting in a worrying increase in xenophobia and even racism. And, at the heart of this deepening position, in the UK and in other countries too is the question that this religious leader asks Jesus: “Who is my neighbour?”

The truth is that we are a quite compassionate nation: we give generously to Children in Need and Comic Relief, we respond when there are international crises with an outpouring of generosity. Locally, here at St. Andrew’s, we show hospitality and care for the vulnerable and we make our weekly collections for the Foodbank and so on…

But I am sure that we will all recognize an emerging pattern in society in general that, in the light of migration and refugee crises particularly, a large number of people are trying to work out who their neighbour is; which is to say, “Who should I help and who shouldn’t I help?” “Who are deserving of my compassion and who are not deserving of my compassion?” “Who should I love – and how much love do I need to give them?”

And so this parable of the God Samaritan speaks into the heart of the 21st-century British psyche. There is a temptation for all of us, when it comes to showing love and compassion to only want to do that to people who are like us or only show love to people who are lovable. How much harder it is to have compassion on the stranger in our midst and to love the unlovable.

But expressing compassion for the stranger and love for the unlovable are part of the DNA of our nation under the moral leadership of our Queen and are part of the DNA of the Christian faith we are trying to live out here at St. Andrew’s.

So let me just reflect briefly on four aspects of the nature of compassion.

**1. Compassion Is Based On Need Not Worth.**

In this parable from Jesus, a man is robbed, wounded and left for dead. Here was a man in desperate need.

But a priest walks by on the other side because he doesn’t want to touch the man and become ceremoniously unclean. If he had touched a man who was about to die, under Jewish law, he would not have been able to carry out his duties.

Likewise a Levite, also a religious leader of the time passed by and did exactly the same thing.

Here were two people who saw a man in need and assessed the situation based not on his need but on whether it was worth their while getting involved. Perhaps they judged the man as not having much worth himself. Perhaps they judged the situation as being too costly for themselves to get involved in. But either way, these great men of faith behaved in a way unbecoming to their religion.

Their sense of compassion was not real; it didn’t impact on the way they lived, because they would not respond to the need of the individual but instead judged his worth to them, his worth to society.

God forbid that this should become an entrenched characteristic of British society as we consider the plight of the migrant, the refugee, the homeless, the mentally ill, the elderly, the vulnerable child in our midst, the sick, the poor, the lonely. That is not a characteristic that the Queen has embodied for us throughout her reign and that is not a characteristic that reflects the Christian gospel.

We are to show compassion where there is need, not where we judge there to be worth or some sort of payback for ourselves.

And true compassion cannot work like that anyway, and this is my second point, because…

**2. Compassion genuinely results in us feeling something**

When the Samaritan comes into the story in verse 33, we read this: “A Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.”

The Greek word used here for ‘moved with pity’ is a very strong one. Without going into too much detail, it has to do with our intestines and bowels and the physical impact that feeling someone else’s pain can have on us physically. The Samaritan saw the man in need and his body convulsed as he embraced the pain of that broken human being lying by the side of the road.

The Samaritan saw the broken man and something happened in his guts that meant he couldn’t just walk away and do nothing. He didn’t question the man’s worth, he didn’t say, “What’s in it for me?” or even, “What’s the cost to me if I help this man?” He just saw the need and he responded to it – no questions asked - because his compassion led him to feel.

And that is compassion.

We want this nation to be a compassionate society: a nation that feels deeply for those in need, those who are fleeing for their lives, those who are suffering from oppression. It doesn’t matter if they are Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jew, whether they are male or female, straight or gay, young or old. Compassion doesn’t ask the question. It just feels…

And then, thirdly, having felt…

**3. Compassion does something to meet the need**

In verse 34, we read this: “So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”

This man does not pass by on the other side.

This man does not judge.

This man does not count the cost.

This man does not consider the inconvenience to himself.

Instead, he sees the need, he feels the need, and he meets the need.

That is compassion in action.

And finally, I want to make the obvious point that…

**4. Compassion costs something**

Verse 35 says this: “On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’

Out of compassion and concern, this man went the extra mile and it cost him time and it cost him money. He did as much as he could do to help with no thought concerning the cost to himself.

And so the parable draws to a close. And you might notice that Jesus does something really clever in verse 36…

The story had started with the religious man asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” But at the end of the story, Jesus reverses the question and says to the religious leader, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell among thieves”.

Jesus has very cleverly reversed the question for us.

The question for us as Christians isn’t “Who is my neighbour?” The question is “Who can I be a good neighbour to?”

And that is a totally different question.

If we ask the question, “Who is my neighbour?”, we will judge others by race, colour, creed, economic viability and cost to ourselves. But if we ask the question, “Who can I be a neighbour to?”, then we won’t judge others; instead, we will be constantly looking out for people in need and do what we can to be a neighbor to them.

That is the hallmark of a society that is founded on a deep concern for social justice.

That is the hallmark of a faith that seeks to love others as we love ourselves.

That is the hallmark of the national spirit that the Queen has embodied for us throughout 90 years of faithful service to her people.

So today, we give thanks to God for Her Majesty the Queen and we give thanks to God that she has embodied for us a strong moral compass and a lively Christian faith that has, in no small degree, shaped the DNA of this nation.

But we are reminded afresh of our responsibilities as a Christian community to do what we can to live out the values of care and compassion and the pursuit of social justice.

Not to ask the question, “Who is my neighbour?” but to ask instead, “Who can I be a neighbour to?”

In this way, we will reflect the love of God in the world and in our community and we will increasingly become the Mission-Shaped Church that God is calling us to be.