

THEOLOGY AS NURSING CARE FOR CULTURES AND SOULS

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WE'VE HEARD IT all before, we know the ending, we've analysed it to bits, we could almost recite it from memory. The Story of the Good Samaritan (*Lk 10:25-37*) is a warm, comfortable, almost sentimental tale.

Yet scholars such as yourselves remind us that when first it was heard, it was far from comfortable: it was packed with shocking little jibes for its first hearers. In the first place, there is implicit criticism of the clergy—for their unneighbourliness, self-protectiveness, ritual pernicketyness. It's not unlike the lambasting, justified and unjustified, that bishops and priests are receiving at present and for some similar reasons. Then there's the shocking suggestion that lay people might be more neighbourly than clergy.

Last of all, there's the intimation that a traditional enemy like the Samaritans could be good, indeed good to Jews, indeed better than Jews at being good to Jews. It is like telling Benjamin Netanyahu that his most reliable neighbour in difficult times would be the Palestinians!

This is typical, of course, of the reversals of common expectations that we meet so often in Jesus' preaching and action—the most dramatic of all being *the Resurrection*.

In tonight's story the hero not only helps, he helps a great deal, extending his care beyond the immediate emergency, seeing to the victim's longer-term good as well. Once again, Jesus is proposing something shocking: a far less measured kind of justice or charity than even his most open-minded and charitable hearers would have thought appropriate, let alone required.

If this story was intended to shock his first

hearers, does it challenge us still, two millennia later, in our very different world? Lawyers don't tend to ask questions about eternal life these days, at least not in public. But they are still very interested in the question 'who is my neighbour?' because it is a central question for the big damages cases in negligence. How that pays out in their own lives is another matter... Throughout the Gospel, Jesus invites his hearers to expand their notions of neighbour and friend, kith and kin, until we see all Christians, indeed all humanity, from near and far, living and dead, and still to come, as *our* people, as 'us' rather than 'them'. Piece by piece Jesus breaks down the tribalism, the ancient animosities, the in-groups and out-groups, enlarging our moral imaginations and sensitivities, so we can put ourselves in the shoes of others affected by what we do or fail to do.

During this conference our attention was drawn to the revival of the atheist book-and-conference industry. The product strikes me as of very uneven quality, commonly ill-informed about religion and often rehearsing rather tired nineteenth century arguments. The sex abuse crisis has been something of a gift for that industry, but apart from that and some bits of new science, there's not much that's new about the 'new' atheism.

One claim that several of its prophets make is that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has made no real contribution to human welfare. Though there are many things one might criticize in Christian history, this claim is surely bizarre. Inspired by the Story of the Good Samaritan and the other teachings and life of Christ its author, Christians have, down through the ages, established orphanages, hospices, hospitals and soup kitch-

ens. Sainted individuals, religious congregations, lay associations such as Vinnies and mass operations such as Caritas, have established so many projects that contribute to human welfare that they and their imitators are now part of the ordinary fabric of any civil society. Following the Good Sam's lead, these charitable works serve not only to 'our own', but anyone in need; indeed they make anyone in need 'our own'. As in the story they focus not only on pressing present need but ongoing welfare. And each of these works, as lived, contemporary versions of Good Samaritanism, challenge us all to exercise more moral imagination, sensitivity and response towards those who suffer. They call us to *com-passio* or fellow-suffering, indeed to identification with every suffering person, and to immediate, active and continuing care.

It was precisely this gut-churning compassion that was the driving force of Jesus' mission. He cared: not just in the abstract, like the reader of a novel sympathising with a fictional character; not like a bureaucrat devising a strategy from a distance; but as one who laughs with those who laugh and mourns with those who mourn, who shares in people's lives, has passion for their passions, suffers in their suffering, and is thus impelled to respond. Jesus identifies himself with those he meets, invests himself in them, makes their good his own, their salvation his purpose.

This was not merely a peculiar feature of Jesus' *psychology*, as if he were a bit of an old softie, a bleeding-heart sentimentalist: it is replete with *theological* significance. The God described so often in the Psalms as 'full of compassion and steadfast love' is the One Jesus knew in prayer, in Liturgy, in his personal life as his *Father*. It was this loving Father-God whose only love-child Jesus was and whom Jesus made known. The Good Samaritan is God in Christ, coming with healing balm and boundless generosity to a broken humanity, and to each example of broken humanity, every case of dire and desperate need. God in his Christ comes seeking no gratitude, no rec-



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ompense, making no inquiry into how deserving the victim, how great their contribution, how many boat-loads of others there might be, whether they have queued properly and have their identity papers in order... And he comes not just to address present pain but to provide for us at the inn to the future, indeed into the life of Resurrection when he will return to settle up for us.

During this time with you I've been pondering how biblical and systematic theology are to be *spiritual works of mercy*, not just activities of the speculative intellect, the incessant delivery of classes, assessment tasks and grades, the never-ending production of books and articles as faith seeks understanding and institutions and individuals seek publications. How can theology be healing balm, oil for troubled waters, wine for bruised bodies and battered souls?

I turned, as is my Dominican instinct, to Uncle Tom's cabin, the *Summa Theologiae*, where the very first question is about the mission of theology and so of the theologian. Is theology a genuine academic discipline and how does it compare with other scholarly disciplines and other human activities? What use is it really? What's its proper subject matter and method and how does it relate to philosophy, Scriptural exegesis and practice? It was as if the Angelic Doctor was on one of those government accreditation panels reviewing our theologates and requiring justification for their programmes—though with a much more interesting questionnaire. His thought is that there are things to which the human spirit in-

eluctably reaches out but cannot attain without help, and so many are left over-stretched, disappointed, confused. Some things we might in principle grasp by our own efforts, but it will 'only be by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.' Humanity, though capable of the nobility and insight of the Good Samaritan, is as often the man beaten and left for dead, not just physically, but intellectually, psychologically, morally, spiritually.

Human beings need more than social justice and social service, corporal works of mercy such as feeding, visiting, burying: they are more than *sarx* (fleshiness), as we've reflected upon in this conference in the light of the Resurrection. We know there are other kinds of hunger, thirst, sickness, imprisonment and death, other kinds of need for *pneuma* (spirit) and *soma* (bodiliness). In his treatment of almsdeeds (*STh. IIa IIæ 32*) St Thomas puts prayer (and sacrament) first—before teaching—and then doctrinal teaching before moral counsel, moral counsel before pastoral care, pastoral care before reproving, pardoning, forbearing. There is a logical chain here which breaks if there is no theological teaching. Put simply: without theology, our morals, charity, reconciliation and peace are all at risk.

Amongst the many evils with which Christ contended and his followers must still contend, *theological ignorance* was one, and such ignorance can play out in terrible damage to whole cultures, societies, families, individual lives. We might consider the actions and inactions of soulless bureaucracies, markets and military machines; the distorted religiosities that leave some struggling to survive while others cross to the safer side of the road; the godless ideologies that in the

century past killed and maimed so many; the religion-free zones that leave so many young and not-so-young people disoriented and addicted, dissatisfied and wounded. Welcome or unwelcome, sacred wisdom comes as divine light, to places darkened by violence and lies, to twilight places indifferent or confused. *Sacra doctrina* should be enlightenment, healing, food, new life, new hope and direction. *Theology can be nursing care for wounded cultures and souls*. The Good Samaritan healed in our story and taught all generations corporal works of mercy; but the telling and retelling of his story by preachers and teachers, and the examination, explication and extension of our story by exegetes and theologians, has enriched us far beyond the mere example of charity-in-action. It has, amongst other things, expanded our notion of what a person *needs* and what it is to *help* a needy human being.

Jesus' call to moral imagination, to compassion, to let our minds be turned upside down and our stomachs inside out, in caring for others, is as much a challenge to the modern theologian as it is to the ancient Jewish scribe anxious to justify himself. So is his call to action not only a call to pour oil and wine on obvious wounds, but to go to the core of what wounds and why and what might be done about it. This is a call to theological thinking and research, teaching and writing that heals, to a scholarly Project Compassion.

To the man born lame and begging at the Beautiful Gate, theological Good Samaritans can say: 'Silver and gold have I none, nor any magic for your paraplegia, but I'll give you what I have: the name of Jesus Christ who heals and saves and in that name you may walk with me.'

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