

## Right and wrong ?

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Lord of all power and might,  
the author and giver of all good things:  
graft in our hearts the love of your name,  
increase in us true religion,  
nourish us with all goodness,  
and of your great mercy, keep us in the same.

Our text is from today's gospel – Luke chapter 10 and verse 25:

**'Teacher . . . what must I do to inherit eternal life ?'**

Luke is the only gospel to tell 'the Parable of the Good Samaritan'. The context for Jesus telling the story is today's text, a question a Jewish doctor of the Law poses to Jesus, **'Teacher . . . what must I do to inherit eternal life ?'**

It is a good question. One way to understand Judaism as a religion is to remember that it is a faith based on a belief in morality: that there is a right and a wrong way of doing things. The Ten Commandments set down the essence of right behaviour, defining what is the correct thing to do and pointing out clearly what is not. The whole of the Jewish Law, the Torah, all 613 commandments, is an attempt to establish a code of right behaviour, of giving the people a clear notion of what is right and what is wrong so that we have a measure by which to determine the righteous life. The whole *raison d'être* of being a Pharisee was to separate themselves from bad, unclean behaviour so that as the Children of God

they could live pure lives with a pure heart and thereby please the Lord our God by being the good and righteous people he intended us to be.

So it is in the spirit of a sense of moral rightness that will lead to salvation and eternal life that the doctor of the Law poses the question. 'Teacher . . . what must I do to inherit eternal life ?'

And Jesus, being a good Jewish teacher, answers the question with a question: 'What is written in the law ?' and the lawyer provides a summary of the law which, later in Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus himself pronounce: 'You shall 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 your neighbour as yourself.' And Jesus agrees with him. Then the lawyer asks for clarification of just who we should consider to be 'my neighbour'.

And we all know the story: a mugging on the road up from Jericho to Jerusalem with those who should have helped the naked, unconscious, bleeding man passing by on the other side and help for the Jew coming from a most unlikely source, a Samaritan, two peoples traditionally at odds with each other. Don't you love it ? Jesus challenge is for us to start to think outside the box. The idea is that everyone is in some sense our neighbour. The French word for neighbour can be 'proche' and so the challenge is think that those separated from us by age, gender, sex, colour or class are in fact near to us, that we're interdependent one with the other – neighbours. What Jesus is offering us is a principle to inform our moral behaviour: love; the loving thing to do; love of God and love of Man

So far so good. Nothing new in what I've said so far but the reason for today's sermon lies in a chance meeting after a funeral, standing there in the family home, making polite conversation when I was approached by a bloke whose opening gambit was: 'There is no such thing as right and wrong.' I must admit I had nothing to say in reply. In the circumstances, I was amazed at what was clearly a provocative statement and I was too tired and too surprised to rise to the bait. I don't think the man really wanted an answer; he only sought to pick a fight with a captive clergyman.

But what I'd like to say now, clearly and unequivocally, is what intuitively we all know, that there is such a thing as right and wrong and in any given situation, we will be able to come up with an idea of what is right and wrong behaviour. Now there can be debate about what exactly constitutes any given right or wrong and how we determine that rightness may well depend on our reference points: rules or outcomes, God-given morality or what is legal at the time of asking or doing. Human beings have an innate sense of right and wrong though a crow in the snow which covered the hill farms of North Wales last March may have no worry about pecking out the tongue a hapless, new-born lamb so that it dies from being unable to suckle its mother's milk. But as conscious moral agents, we know that such careless cruelty is not how to behave.

Let me conclude then by affirming that there is such a thing of right behaviour and part of what we do in worshipping God is to try to live the good life, the righteous life, the life lived according to God's laws. To learn to do so could be the work of a lifetime – but it is still the right thing to do.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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G: Sermons 28 : Right and wrong

