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Once Again, Now, "Who is my Neighbour?"

by L. Paul Trudinger

Last time Dr. Trudinger wrote for us, he examined the syntax of Genesis 2: 5. This time he moves back to the New Testament and takes up a question of interpretation—the relevance of the parable of the good Samaritan to the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbour?"

“THE lawyer's question is well and truly answered, and we need not complain, as fussy commentators do, if the answer reports what a neighbor does, rather than telling us who is to be regarded as a neighbor.” So writes Professor Cyril Blackman in an article in which he gives a very lucid summary and a penetrating critique of some recent approaches to the interpretation of the parables.¹ But is it mere fussiness to note the shift in focus from the lawyer's (theologian's) question, “Who is my neighbour?” to the question Jesus asks in return: “Which one was neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?”? Is not this the very kind of “twist” which characterizes so many of the parables?² May we not be doing an injustice to the author's intention if we by-pass such subtleties in the parable teller's art? Blackman quotes with seeming approval Curtis's contention that the understanding of a parable's meaning “presupposes what Jesus calls the hearing ear and the seeing eye.”³ Perhaps, then, the stabbing nature of Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question will only be understood in all its fulness if we get the point of the shift in focus involved in Jesus' question, “Which one was neighbour. . . .”? Certainly at a time like ours when we are being made more sensitive to new and creative dimensions of meaning which the parables yield when viewed as artistic literary works, “aesthetic objects”, to adopt Via's phrase,⁴ we should not be too quick to rule out the possibilities of deep significance which may lie in a subtle twist of this kind.

With these things in mind, I propose to point up what seem to me to be significant dimensions of meaning stemming from this shift

1 E. C. Blackman, “New Methods of Parable Interpretation,” *Canadian Journal of Theology*, XV, No. 1, pp. 3-13. The above quotation is on p. 11.

2 See Geraint V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), p. 32.

3 W. A. Curtis, *Jesus Christ the Teacher* (London: O.U.P., 1943), p. 83, quoted by Blackman, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

4 See Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimensions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), especially ch. 3, pp. 70-107.

of focus about which we have spoken. If, as Geraint V. Jones has asserted (and again Professor Blackman appears to voice his agreement), "the test of the rightness or wrongness of any interpretation of the parables is not whether it conforms to some preconceived idea of what a parable ought to be, but the extent to which it is congruous with the parable as a whole,"⁵ then we must ask whether the significance we attach to this shift in focus supports and adds to the thrust of the parable as "a damning indictment of social, racial and religious superiority."⁶ We may say all we like about the subtlety of this shift not being intended by the author. The fact is that it is plainly there. Jesus could just as easily have been made to ask: "Which one treated the waylaid man as his neighbour?" But this is not the form the question took. Intended or not, the shift of focus has a potency. May it not be an example of what Blackman calls "the inspired creativeness of the original author?"⁷

I do not believe we are reading too much into the lawyer's question if we suggest that it is asked from a position of superiority; that it betrays overtones of smugness and self-satisfaction. We are told that he asked the question "to justify himself." He feels that he has met the requirements for salvation and wants to know just how much further he should extend the conferral of his favours. There is no evidence given by the form of his question that he sees himself as standing in need of help. "Who is my neighbour?" clearly means "What other poor people should I try to help?" and not "To whom should I go for help?" Jesus' reply makes patently clear the unlimited dimensions of neighbourliness at the same time as it stabbingly exposes the racial prejudices, the professional apathies and the religious superiorities which hinder neighbourliness. But it is at the point where Jesus causes the lawyer to involve himself in the implication of the story, that is, in Jesus' question, that the thrust of Jesus' message is most suprisingly seen. For the question "Which one was neighbour to the man who was waylaid?" requires that the answer be given from the position of the man in trouble; that the lawyer put himself in the place of the waylaid man; that he answer as one in need of help. The thrust of this shift of focus is highly pertinent to a right understanding of neighbourliness. This was the lesson which Jesus realized the lawyer in his "superior" stance most needed to learn. The neighbour is not the poor person on whom I confer the favor of my attention, but the one who comes to me in my need. Only when we have known ourselves ministered unto can we truly minister to others in the spirit of the Good Samaritan. This is the stabbing truth with which Jesus confronts the lawyer when,

⁵ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 108, quoted by Blackman, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁶ Blackman, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

after helping him to see that the neighbour is the one who comes to him in his need, Jesus issues the imperative, "You go and do the same!"

If we were to go no further than this we would nevertheless be underscoring an aspect of the parable's "damning indictment of social, racial and religious superiority" which many of us, both individually and corporately as the Church, greatly need to attend to today. So much of our concern for, and efforts on behalf of, the poor, the racial minorities, is still fraught with overtones of paternalism and is undertaken so often from the secure stance of our own vantage point, that we need to face with honesty Jesus' question and hear his thundering imperative ever and again! We talk a good game about empathy, about feeling the pinch of our brother's shoe, but few are prepared actually to be dispossessed for his sake. We give part of what we ourselves do not really need from our affluent store. As much as we need to hear this word of judgment, however, we should not respond to the challenge of the parable merely by beating ourselves over the head for our insensitivity to real need. The parable is more than an indictment; more than a call for a more rigorous effort to be neighbourly. It has been preserved by the early Christian community as a word of Jesus and, within the context of a gospel, a word of good news for man. As a part of the gospel the parable should in some significant way illuminate the theme of the possibilities of freedom open to men and women. This theme Jesus not only announced but also enfleshed. He is the liberator!

Blackman is insistent that we should not interpret this parable in a Christological sense. "We should resist the temptation," he says, "to treat this parable as a *Beispiel*, not of neighbourliness, but of the God-man relationship."⁸ But must these be alternatives? If we take seriously the parable as an "aesthetic object" having its own evocative power, why should not both aspects prove productive to the interpreter? Furthermore, we must face the question as to whether the original teller of the story and the first preservers of the story may not have intended a very intimate connection between the demonstration of neighbourliness as set forth in the story and the God-man relationship as demonstrated in Jesus' dealings with men and women. I suggest that we cannot ignore or write off as irresponsible fancifulness the painstaking and detailed exegesis set out by Gerhardsson to demonstrate the thematic and etymological connections between the Good Samaritan and the Good Shepherd.⁹ To see Jesus as the Good Samaritan in this light is not to allegorize but rather to interpret a word-play intended by the community which preserved the story.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ Birger Gerhardsson, *The Good Samaritan—The Good Shepherd?* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1958). See especially pp. 9-29.

The Church's word to the good, religious, but somewhat self-satisfied enquirer, typified by the lawyer, was that he needed to experience the ministrations of the Good Samaritan and then go and act likewise. It was a word both of challenge and of promise, for the Church's gospel was that the help men needed was present and available; for Jesus was able to confront the lawyer both with his need and his responsibility and to offer His help precisely because He had suffered with and for men and women. He had identified Himself with the outcasts, the dispossessed, and had been willing to become dispossessed Himself for their sakes. He was the friend of sinners who was happy to take the insults directed at Him and the abuse heaped on Him on account of His association with the people whom the majority rejected and scorned. In this sense the waylaid man also speaks to us of Jesus, and inasmuch as we minister to men and women in their need we minister to Him. This theme of Jesus' identification with men and women in their needy plight and the freedom which He gives us to range ourselves with Him wherever people suffer resounds throughout the New Testament. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, after setting forth Jesus' qualifications to be mankind's minister on account of His solidarity with the human race, insists in the last chapter on the necessity for Christians to be with Jesus "outside the camp", that is, at the place of Jesus' rejection, and to bear the same abuse as He bore.¹⁰ Such a vocation is what we must expect if we seriously ask of Jesus the question "Who is my neighbour?" and are prepared to listen for His answer. The punch-line is as stabbing now as ever: "Go and do the same!"

Arlington, Va.

¹⁰ See Hebrews 2: 17-18; 4: 14; 10: 39; 13: 12-13.