

I want to look today at the story Jesus told in today's gospel reading. It's a story set on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, and apart from the usual interpretations we bring to it, it is for me a story about chance encounters and being open to what happens. I'd like to start by telling you about a chance encounter I had on this road between Jerusalem and Jericho 11 years ago.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is a major highway these days, about 30 kms. It drops steeply in elevation from Jerusalem at 760m above sea level to Jericho 250m below sea level. Patrick and I pulled off the highway to get a sense of the wilderness that the road passes through. It is wild country, inhospitable. As we stood taking it all in I heard the sound of bells tinkling, and around the hills came a Bedouin shepherd boy leading his sheep. Yes they do know his voice and follow! There were goats too, and I understood why Jesus told another story about separating the sheep from the goats, because the goats did not follow and had to rounded up as the wandered. Patrick got talking with him, though he had very little English, and he offered us his hospitality and made us a cup of tea – gathering twigs for a fire, boiling water, and then milking a goat for us. We were welcomed into this country by a simple boy. He had very little but he shared what he had. It was such a special gift of unexpected grace – I will never forget it.

The gospel story we heard in is Luke chapter 10. I was curious about the context for this story, particularly its geography. Where was Jesus? Where he when he told it? We don't know for sure. In Luke in chapter 9 we are told Jesus is in Bethsaida – at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, Lake Tiberius to the Romans. Later in the chapter he goes up a mountain – which is not named, with Peter, James and John, and they see him temporarily transformed in glory.

At the end of chapter 9, verse 51 we are told that Jesus is about to travel to Jerusalem. He doesn't go straight there though. Following on from the reading we are going to hear we find that he has arrived in Bethany, east of Jerusalem, at the house of Martha and Mary, sisters to Lazarus. How did he get from Bethsaida to Bethany? There is only really one way - He went through Samaritan territory:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, Lord do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them? But he turned and rebuked them and they went on to another village.

So somewhere on that road, after the experience of being rejected by a Samaritan village, Jesus has this encounter with a religious leader. We know this story as 'The Good Samaritan'. That word has so many cultural and linguistic overlays for us. We think of people and charities, organisations, those who strive to do good and care for people in need. To be called a Samaritan in our day is a compliment, and badge of honour. But it was not so when Jesus told this story.

It is hard for us to see just how shocking this story was. It was shocking to the religious leader, who would have had very fixed ideas about the false beliefs of the Samaritans and their religious impurity. We kind of get that. But it must have also been shocking to the disciples too, because of their own recent rejection by the Samaritan village who refused them hospitality – a gross insult in middle eastern culture. To get the impact it had we might need to reframe this story as something like “the good Bkie gang member”. Or “the good skinhead”. It is confronting to consider what Jesus is saying here. He is turning on its head all ideas of religious righteousness. The moral high ground is given to one who is normally outcast, despised, rejected. It is given to someone from a race who the disciples know have experienced as rude and inhospitable to them as travellers on the road. What a shock it was for them all to hear that story. What is interesting for me about this story too is the fact it doesn't appear in any of the other gospels. The writer of Luke has a focus in telling his version of the story of Jesus which affirms more than any of the other writers the marginal members of society: women, the less-than-pious, tax collectors, the poor, the sick, the oppressed - these are present and interact with Jesus more prominently in Luke than in any other gospel. So into this mix he throws a story of a Samaritan that went against cultural expectations, and against their prior experience, a Samaritan who showed compassion, care, hospitality, generosity. He showed love, practical, real, grounded, with no expectation of return.

What does that mean for us? I begin to wonder about the people around me who I would normally discount, or overlook. People I take for granted, people I don't like. Who are the people I don't trust, who I despise? Asking those questions for me raises awareness that I do have prejudices.

I am biased in my attitudes towards groups of people – those who think differently to me, those who vote differently to me, to those whose attitudes about issues important to me stands in opposition to my own. Often in hearing this story we are encouraged to consider where are the needs around us that we should be attending to. Where are the people we should be stopping to help and care for? But I am wondering now about the fact that in this story it was the underdog who stepped up to care. I am being invited here to consider how I can open myself to receive the gifts of people that I might otherwise dismiss. I am a proud woman. I find it hard to ask for help, to name my needs to others and accept their care. I see this in others too. In my work at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre there are patients who find it hard to find themselves the recipients of care from family and friends. They have been the strong ones in their networks, and now they need help. Or they are being offered help by those who care for them and they find it so hard to accept. I try to help them see that to be willing to receive help is also an act of hospitality, of welcome, of relationship and love. To be able to ask for help is to offer others the gift of being able to express their care and their love.

In the story Jesus told the man who was robbed on the road was an active participant in the expression of love shared. So who are the unexpected ones around me who offer me loving support? Where can I see acts of kindness and care as I go about my days? How can I join with these to share in the life of love that Jesus invites us to? The question from the religious leader was : What do I need to do to inherit life without limit from God?

I really like Nathan's paraphrase here of what it is normally translated as 'inherit eternal life.' To my mind the phrase 'eternal life' is about something that happens the other side of death. But to inherit life without limit from God speaks to me about life here and now. It makes me think of the words of Jesus in John 10:10 saying that he came so that we may have life in all its fullness. Life without limit, life in its fullness, abundant life, surely these are the signs of life lived well here and now. I don't see this being a promise of life without difficulties or sadness or struggle. They are part of the fullness of life, what we all experience in the human condition. Life without limit is a life lived with love and openness to God, openness to our neighbours, openness to those whom we might not like, openness to those who can surprise us yet with what they can bring to enrich our lives. The story Jesus told in answer to this question was a disturbing story. It is disturbing because it turns upside down our experience and hopefully our expectations of how God is present and active in our world. The chance encounter I had 11 years ago was gave me fresh insight into welcome and hospitality. It was not we, the rich westerners, who were generous. We were invited not just to have a cup of tea, but to stop and accept the simple gifts of grace and care in the wilderness. Look around you to see who are the people who are living out the values of God's kingdom. They may surprise and disturb you. They may be the Bedouin shepherd, the agnostic, the atheist, the Muslim, the biker, the skinhead.

I want to finish with a prayer by Sir Francis Drake. A prayer that invites this disturbance in our lives. **Drake** was an English [sea captain](#), [privateer](#), [slave trader](#), [naval officer](#) and [explorer](#) of the [Elizabethan era](#). His exploits made him a hero to the English, but his [privateering](#) led the Spanish to brand him a [pirate](#), known to them as *El Draque*. The prayer he wrote invites God to disturb us, much as the hearers of Jesus' story would have been disturbed:

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess we have lost our thirst for the waters of life;*

*Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wilder seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.*

*We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes;  
And to push back the future in strength, courage, hope, and love. Amen*

Rev Roslyn H Wright  
14/07/2019