# Who is my neighbour? 29 May 2016

Luke 10: 25-37

# Introduction

Today is the fifth Sunday of the month and in the new preaching programme it means that I am free to tackle a contemporary issue – a hot topic as Andrew told me a few weeks ago. Great, I thought, at long last I can have a go at the Trinity! No, not the Holy Trinity, that was for last weekend on Trinity Sunday. I mean the unholy Trinity: money, politics and religion, the three things about which you are not supposed to speak in polite company. Now this is very polite company, so apologies in advance. Also, Andrew wondered if I might reflect on the plight of refugees if I wasn’t brave enough to go for the EU referendum. Well, as you know I always like a good challenge, so strap yourselves in, it might be quite a rollercoaster ride this morning as we are going to cover quite a lot of ground!

It would be completely inappropriate for me to tell you how to vote in the referendum, that would be pulpit abuse, but given the column inches devoted to polls in various countries over the past few weeks, never mind what is to come in the next month, I do want to think about voting, why it matters and why it is our Christian duty to do so.

If ever there was an image that captured the essence of the importance of the vote, it would have to be the pictures of thousands of people queueing in the dust and heat in South Africa for the first free elections. But if there is a picture or a story that epitomises the challenges of voting, I’m afraid I think I saw and heard that three weeks ago when I was in Manila at the time of the presidential elections. Money and politics, hand in hand as always.

Max and I were walking to the tennis court in the village where he lives for our usual 3 hour session. It was seven o clock in the morning (a bit later than usual because it was a public holiday), on election day itself. As we crossed the main road in the village, a woman came across to us holding an umbrella and a handful of papers – like this one. Now you need to know that the elections were for president, (eight candidates), vice president (about five candidates) , local mayor and all the councillors. So the list of choices is huge. But, this being the Phillipines, in Makati where we were (one of the seven cities that make up Metro Manila), it was simplified by the fact that the current vice president was one of the presidential candidates, his son was one of the candidates for mayor and his wife for vice mayor. The piece of paper the woman gave to me and to Max was to make things easy – it tells you how to vote, actually precisely which votes to cast. Now this being a middle class, affluent village, no money was offered. But, when we got to the tennis court, the lads with whom we play every day told us that outside, the going rate was 1000 pesos for president and vp and about 500 pesos for the other places. Now bear in mind that in the Philippines the average daily wage, the minimum wage is 300 pesos (about £4). So if you played your cards right, or made the right promises, you could pick up about 5000 pesos, and for a typical family you might get up to 25,000 pesos for the household. Quite a tempting carrot.

But that is not the whole story. There is far worse, as I was told the next day by one of our longstanding friends who had worked in the bank with us. Currently unemployed, he makes some money as a taxi driver. To put this part of the story into context you need to know that one of the presidential candidates was someone called Mar Rojas, the grandson of the first president of the Philippines and currently a government minister – the Interior Ministry with particular responsibility for disasters. He handled or rather mishandled the aftermath (and all the cash) for Typhoon Yolanda, the supertyphoon that devastated Tacloban nearly three years ago. Randy (our friend) was asked two days before the election by a couple of his friends who were local councillors to take them to the local golf club for a meeting with the state governor (a Senator). They were co-ordinators for the Rojas campaign. In the car on the way back they showed Randy the contents of the brown envelope they had each received – it was 5000 pesos in cash. But they said our friend the leader of the council had got 15000 pesos. There were 91,000 polling stations in the Philippines – so based on the typical model of two to three co-ordinators plus the leader, Rojas spent something in the order of 2.275 billion pesos, not including the millions for the likes of the state governor – about £32.5m, roughly the amount raised in the UK in the first day of the disaster relief campaign. Coincidence? I think not! But probably paling into comparison beside the hundreds of millions of dollars spent in the US elections, although possibly not taken from money raised for disaster relief…

Now corruption in politics is nothing new, but in spite of these stories and all their consequences, some democracy is better than no democracy. As Tony Benn once said, the key questions to ask are: who has the power? how much have they got? How did they get it? And how do we take it away from them? And these questions are certainly at the heart of the debate over the EU.

But, let me ask the questions in a rather different way. What kind of community do we want to be? Trump wants to build walls – well, that has historical precedent many of the people in post Exilic Israel thought that the answer to the problems of the Exile, God’s abandonment of his chosen people, was to build a fence, literally, around Torah and so created the city of Jerusalem. In this country, many want to retreat within our island borders and let the sea be the barrier, certainly cheaper than a wall to keep out Mexicans.

But what community are we? What community do we want to be? What community are we called to be? Margaret Thatcher once said there is no such thing as society. For an avowed Christian, that was a pretty strange thing to say and I’ve certainly never understood what she meant by that (or much else of what she said either but that’s another story). I believe that the story Jesus told the expert in the law shows precisely what kind of community we are called to be.

The opening of the story is critical. The so-called expert asks what he needs to do to inherit eternal life – quite a presumptuous question I have always thought. So Jesus says what does the law say, how do you read the law? And the expert replies with the two great commandments, love the lord your god with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength and your neighbour as yourself. Quite right says Jesus (I’m paraphrasing a bit here). But then the expert asks, who is my neighbour? And it is this question which is I think the hot, the burning white hot topic, the contemporary problem that has confronted every group of people gathered together over the millennia. Most of the time, my perception is that people understand this to be a reactive kind of question, the people that live near you, or the people who think like you, or the people you would like to live near you or the people you would like to think like you.

But Jesus’ answer to this question is fundamentally challenging and world changing. He tells the story of how three different people reacted to being confronted by seeing a half-dead naked man lying in the road in front of them, no doubt blood everywhere, the poor victim whimpering or crying for help. This is not a one-off type situation, for example the aftermath of a terrible tragedy, a terrorist incident or a natural disaster when people absolutely do come together, forget their own safety and do whatever they can. No, the way Jesus tells the story shows that this is meant to be a ‘usual’ encounter, not exactly everyday, but certainly a run of the mill event – and believe you me, you don’t need to go back two millennia for this to be ordinary, contemporary Philippines, like many so-called developing countries, have this as a daily reality even today. So my point is that we can’t reassure ourselves with the ‘well of course we would pitch in to help, it’s an instinctive reaction in a crisis, think of the British spirit, the spirit of the blitz.’ No we can’t get away that easily from the tungsten sharp point of the story.

Jesus tells us that the priest and the Levite not only did not stop, they deliberately crossed the road to be further away from the man as they continued their journey. The impact to Jesus’ audience would be a bit like saying that the Archbishop of Canterbury and Mother Teresa both crossed the road to get away from the victim. Now I’m sure there would be some apologists who would say, well, maybe they were on the way to a service or something and had to be clean and so the blood of the victim would have been a real problem for them. Again, a temptation to look for excuses, an explanation of why they didn’t stop.

And then Jesus delivers the killer blow. Of all people, it was a Samaritan, someone from Samaria which was a really despised place, who not only stopped, literally going out of his way to go to the poor man’s aid. And not just stopped for a moment to give immediate relief, but put the man on his donkey and took him to an inn and cared for him. Note, an inn – not the inn where he might have been planning to stay. No, the Samaritan not didn’t just stop, help, he also dropped everything and changed all his plans and spent money to make sure the man was looked after. Effectively, he did everything in his power, immediately, to make sure that the man had a better future.

And then Jesus asks the final awesome question: who do you think was a neighbour to the man? And you get the sense that the so-called expert is now a shadow of his former self as he grudgingly, shamefully, embarrassed, confesses – the one who had mercy. And Jesus has no compunction in ending, with a message as life-changing as it was to the rich young ruler who similarly asked about how to inherit eternal life, go and do likewise.

It is a life-changing message because it is as revolutionary, as radical, as total as the go, sell all you have and give to the poor, as was the message to the rich young ruler. There can be no half-heartedness, no holding back, no hesitation. It is nothing short of a 100% commitment, 100% of the time. It is a mindset, a way of behaving, a way of being. Truly to be a neighbour is to be engaged, involved, present to need wherever it is, and arguably, one message is that you should perhaps go to look for where the greatest need is. That is kingdom thinking, that is what we as Christians are called to be, a community of people who are neighbours, who go to be neighbours of those in need. Gratuitously, unconditionally and unreservedly – just like God’s love.

Of course it is not easy, and as one of my former students wrote reflecting on her time when we were working in Central America:

As I was taking a warm shower tonight, I couldn’t help but think about the people in the class today and what they would be doing now. Did they have any sort of supper? Are they warm? Do they have a warm place to sleep tonight? Did they have clean clothes to sleep in and a clean place to put their heads? Doubtful, So how could I stand there with the hot water rinsing away all the filth that I had picked up today almost as if I could rinse away all traces of the place and the people I met knowing that they were freezing in their huts? I wanted so much to take them home with me and give them a bath and a haircut and new clothes and a hot meal and a warm place to sleep and to tell them that I could make it all better. Of course I know I can’t do that and I don’t know what I really can do. Should I give up my hot showers and meals and devote my life to making these people’s lives better? Would it be worth it? Would they really be better off? I’m not sure anymore. There is so much more than I ever knew there was and I’m not even sure whether or not I can make a difference at all. Rationally I keep telling myself that if I can help one person then I know it was worth it, but where does that end? When can I humanely say that I have helped enough people?

But even though it is difficult, painful and hard work. That is what we are called to do. We have to engage with the world, we have to try to be neighbours, we do, I’m afraid, have to talk about the unholy Trinity – money politics and religion – as we speak about the real Trinity!

John Donne expressed this calling in one of his most famous poems, in words which are as powerful and relevant today as ever before :

No man is an island,

Entire of itself,

Every man is a piece of the continent,

A part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,

Europe is the less.

As well as if a promontory were.

As well as if a manor of thy friend's

Or of thine own were:

Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am involved in mankind,

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;

It tolls for thee

If you want a passage on which to meditate before entering the ballot box or thinking about the plight of refugees, I think that is not a bad starter for 10.

But, let’s leave the last word with John:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. … Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Amen