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**The Lord Mayor's Farewell Service**

The Revd George Bush, Lord Mayor's Chaplain

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The parable of the Good Samaritan is arguably religion as the English like it best – narrative, devoid of ritual and with a clear practical and ethical point. And for a churchman who might demur such instincts, there is on the lips of Jesus an undoubted side swipe at a priest just to keep us in our place. The Good Samaritan and the tag, 'Go and do likewise' – the motto of Sion College the London clerical society founded in the reign of Charles 1 – is foundational of Christian charitable endeavour. The joy of the parable is just how approachable it is; arbitrary street violence, the readiness of those who should know better to pass by without intervention, the compassion of one who would ordinarily be despised and in this context was actually the purveyor of defilement – these features if not modern are accessible. The risk – hardly a great one you will say – is that the parable obscures just how utterly foreign the world of Jesus is to us and just how deeply religious this parable is.

In an east end parish I used to know very well there was a most engaging priest, a mentor of mine, with all the best instincts of community and pastoral work – I think I could measure his success when it was said of him by one parishioner, 'We never used to have all this 'love your neighbour stuff' until Father Nick came here'. By contrast I was appalled recently, visiting a remote-ish Yorkshire village to discover at its centre a community of houses, ridiculously over-posh to my thinking, and separated from the rest of this little neighbourhood by electric gates. All a stark contrast to, for example Spain where to be a neighbour, '*un vecino*', is to be part of a carefully and constitutionally constructed relationship with duties and responsibilities.

And being neighbourly is not just about being sunny in disposition every morning and checking the old ladies' milk deliveries (if there were such a thing); for Christians it is a theological exercise. The parable of the Good Samaritan is properly set together with a question put to Jesus about what mattered most in the Law and his famous reply adumbrating the two principle commandments as he saw them; 'Love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself' – which was more surprising than you might think. The originality in this lies not in the choice of phrases from scripture and tradition, partly from the *Shema* – the Jewish creed as it were - but the way in which Jesus couples love for God and love for neighbour in the same simple summary. If you think you love God and don't love your neighbour, or if you only love your neighbour and neglect God – you are equally to be pitied. This combination was known to some Jews, but Christians from the lips of Jesus have taken this wonderfully to heart and given a rather Jewish insight a world-wide prominence. Sometimes, just sometimes, we Christians are worthy of our Jewish past. Of course the revision of the definition of neighbour which this parable proposes requires us to look at who are real neighbours are differently. Living in the middle of Cheapside, which Jane Austen considered to be of very doubtful respectability, and with nothing but Argos,

Tesco and Coq d'argent in between; my neighbours are the residents of the Mansion House but in this past year I have not been called upon to lend so much as a cup of sugar or a bottle of bleach; although happily and gratefully there has been much traffic the other way! But between my church and the Mansion House on any night there are usually also some people sleeping rough.

The Good Samaritan is a neighbour from a world in which we are neither comfortable nor sociable, cast in the manner of Jesus' own compassion in the face of the sick, the disabled, the bereaved. These are the signs and symbols of Jesus putting love for God and love for neighbour so close together that they can never again be separated.

Although when Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher was not known as a noted biblical scholar, she added a refinement to the general appreciation of the parable of the Good Samaritan by reminding us that he did not merely have good intentions, he had money also. Jesus elsewhere was deeply sensible of the risk that money and wealth constituted to spiritual health. Although what Mrs T said has a natural truth – that compassion is often best associated with generosity; this is not a parable about money. Its principle concern is to redefine the limits of neighbourliness.

For we have to look to the death and resurrection of Jesus for the final confirmation that this indeed is God's own project. The characters in the sorry tale; priests, betrayer, guards, governor, torturers, deserting disciples are not cast as enemies as they would in any usual drama. The parable of the Good Samaritan only works if no one is demonised, no one beyond love and forgiveness; no one from whom we cannot learn greater love than we have yet taken to heart. The Good Samaritan is sound counsel of how to live the good life by going beyond what our environment affords for generosity. But more than that it asserts that in all God's people we are given a field in which to exercise our love for God. Anything less and our worship is in vain.