

The Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers

Installation Service

Tuesday 14th May 2019 at 5.45pm

The Revd George Bush, Rector of St Mary-le-Bow

The Good Samaritan

The parable of the Good Samaritan is arguably religion as the British 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 I – 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 overposh 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 principal 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.

It is the case that up to early modern times every great house as part of its policy of considerable and munificent hospitality would retain an almoner whose task was to distribute

what was left over from the feasting to the poor and destitute. And we know that the dissolution of the monasteries removed a considerable safety net for the local poor – in that regard the monks and nuns were perhaps not often neglectful of duty to neighbour.

It is to my mind an extraordinary refreshment of the livery that this company has with vision and administrative purpose combined an active engagement with the future of design and manufacture with the charitable function of a welfare fund. This ability to look to the future with hope and to support the needs shaped by the past and felt in the present with financial help is nothing short of genius. Since this is the only occupational charity for the furniture making and furnishing industry the alliance is a completion of a circle of definition for your objects. Your website attests that a grant, negotiated with your welfare officer assisted a former cabinet maker to turn around a situation of dire need when he was at his emotional lowest. The other stories are comparable and affecting.

I hazard that this association with a charitable object which you cannot evade will be good for the instincts of the Company and good for each of you; as you set your own ambitions and prosperity within the context of those in the industry who have fallen behind.

The Good Samaritan is not just a moral tale – though it is that. 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.