

“THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS”

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Readings: Psalm 82, Amos 7.7 -17, Luke 10.25-37

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

It is probably fair to say that nobody likes to be criticized. We likely all have childhood memories of feeling that an effort we made had been found inadequate. Did anyone ever tell you that you were not big enough, not clever enough, not tidy enough, not fast enough? There are endless ways in which we fall short of the mark. Ways we fail to meet some standard. The whole advertising industry is based on it – the reason you ought to buy this car or that kind of household cleaner is that without it you are inadequate – with it you will be more competent, more cool, more likely to fall in love. We hear those critical voices first at home and at school and then at work and on the TV. Then the mean little voice *inside* takes over to whisper, this isn't good enough; actually, *you* aren't good enough.

There is a range of ways to respond to criticism – sometimes we become defensive, over-justifying ourselves and our behavior; sometimes we throw it back, and go on the offensive; and sometimes we just shut down and refuse to engage. Occasionally, we have the courage to listen to criticism and let it become a source of improvement. Sometimes criticism can be received as constructive. But it usually depends on how much encouragement is in the mix.

The Bible hands out a lot of criticism, and often not very much encouragement – this morning's lectionary passages are relentless. All three tell stories of stern admonition. In the Psalms we see God at a kind of conference table with the other 'gods' of the time. God upbraids them for favouring the wicked, and demands that they give justice to the poor. This psalm is a somewhat odd reminder of a time when

the writers of the Hebrew scriptures were still wrestling with the concept of one God. It's as if they haven't quite settled on monotheism. Psalm 82 presents God as the chairman of the board, rebuking the subordinate gods. We don't hear how they respond. [In terms of the larger Bible narrative, you could say they just disappear.]

In the passage from Amos, the shepherd prophet goes to the big city to excoriate the rich and mighty in the name of God, and to tell them that the plumbline against which they are measured shows them to be seriously askew. They are off-kilter. They are so offended by the criticism that they chase him away. How dare you, they say? Get out of this kingdom! Then Amos too becomes defensive – you see how criticism has this tendency to escalate. Well, I am not even claiming to be a prophet, he says, I am a shepherd. It was God who told me to say so!

The story of criticism we find in the Gospel of Luke is not as straightforward as these first two – it is a subtle tale of implied disapproval and oblique response. The lawyer sets out to test Jesus by showing him up. He does this by asking how he may obtain eternal life. It seems odd that this would be considered a good test – even a young Jewish child would know the answer that Jesus gives. Love God, love neighbour. Simple.

Then comes the wrinkle – but who is my neighbour? As so often happens, Jesus replies with a story that is jarring enough to startle his audience. Don't look to your spiritual leader, he says, nor even to your own community. Don't look at the law. Jesus doesn't give a rule of thumb or a theoretical construct. He doesn't describe neighbourliness, but points to a person. The Samaritan himself is presented as the standard. It is the person of the Samaritan. Jesus points to the person, not the rule or the obligation or the performance. It is the person who serves as the plumbline in this case, against which the conventions of religion are found wanting.

Just as Jesus himself is the plumbline that God has set in Israel for all to see, in this parable he presents the Samaritan as plumbline. It is the Samaritan against whom Jesus wants his listeners to measure themselves. So we are invited to look at him to see what the standard is. From the spare description we have, we see that the Samaritan seems to have been a fairly simple soul. As far as we know he wasn't a person who had initiated a program of roadside assistance. He wasn't a famous philanthropist or humanitarian. He didn't think of himself as a good Samaritan in our sense.

As Jesus tells it, it seems that the Samaritan being a traveller, was simply open to whatever presented itself. In his response to the man fallen among thieves, he operated almost automatically. There is no sign that he wrestled with a moral quandary, weighing the danger to himself, or the expense, against a sense of moral responsibility. What we hear about is the combination that he carried in himself of attentiveness, feeling and action. It seems the Samaritan had a habit of attentiveness which allowed him to perceive the situation correctly. He saw what was important about it, he understood the need, and how he could help.

He also had the habit of accurate emotional response – as we are told, he ‘was moved with compassion’.

And then, we see that he has the habit of action. With utmost practicality, he steps in to assist the stricken wayfarer. The Samaritan does something that is effective, that does not prolong the man’s debility, nor create future dependency. His head, heart and hands are integrated.

Jesus turns aside the hairsplitting question of his critic, and encourages him instead. Go and do likewise, he says, be attentive, be compassionate, and act accordingly.

But he is also saying, be like a stranger. For Jesus and his listeners, the main point seems to be that the Samaritan is a stranger. He is travelling outside his own country, in a land that is rather hostile to people of his nation. And there is a freedom in that. And of course, in a funny way, as a stranger you aren’t quite as vulnerable to criticism. Perhaps his kindness is actually a *function* of his stranger-status. He is more open to see and to feel and to act, more able to see the opportunity for kindness, than he might be in his own home.

Jesus says, be like a stranger. Be a little immune to the community norms. Look at your surroundings with the interest and open-mindedness of a newcomer. Let your kindness flow from attentiveness, let your compassion be unimpeded by social expectations, let your actions be determined not by convention but by practicality. Let your kindness be the kindness of the stranger.

Let us pray:

Loving God, give us eyes to see what is before us, hearts to be moved by the needs of another, and hands willing to offer help. Teach us the kindness of strangers. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.