

I remember sitting in a Sunday School class in 1975, and listening to our teacher, Mr Cameron, tell us a very involved story of a traveller on the road to Burke, who'd been stopped by a gang of bikies, and been beaten up by them, they took his car, and left him lying on the side of the road.

And strangely enough, three people came along in turn. The mayor, driving a Mercedes, the local minister driving a nice new holden, neither of them stopped to help the man. Finally, an aborigine driving a battered old FJ Holden with only one headlight came along, and stopped and helped the man.

Seven year old me sat there and thought to myself "Mr Cameron's telling us the story of the good Samaritan". And sure enough, he was. I don't remember the first time I heard about the Good Samaritan – but by the time I was seven I knew it well enough to recognise it, even though the setting was changed.

If we're church goers, we know this story, this parable. And even people who have nothing to do with church know this story.

I did a quick google news search this week:

- Booze thief jailed over savage attack on good Samaritan – South Burnett in Queensland
- Fuel hike affecting good Samaritan who freely transports the elderly in Cape Town – Capetalk Radio in South Africa
- Britain's Burrage plays Wimbledon Good Samaritan before early exit
- Juveniles arrested for stealing gun from Good Samaritan – Cairo Upstate New York

This one which puzzles me a bit:

- Good Samaritan Guns Down Neighbour Who Was Shooting His Own Mother – Harris County, Texas

And Mt Vernon in Virginia seems to be a particularly rich source of kind hearted Samaritans:

- Good Samaritan helps cover funeral expenses for Mt. Vernon boy killed in firework accident
- Sheriff's Office seeks to thank Good Samaritan for aiding in rescue efforts.

There were plenty more. I reckon the Good Samaritan is the most well-known of Jesus' parables. The only other one that *might* come close would be the parable of the prodigal son, but I think the Good Samaritan is the one that just about everyone will know.

But the danger with that familiarity is that we think we know it so well that we stop thinking about it. We know the story: man robbed and beaten. Priest ignores him. Levite ignores him. Samaritan saves him. Wow, what a surprise. Go and be like the Samaritan.

And you can't argue with that. But I think there's more we can gain from it.

Our reading began at verse at verse 25:

“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The context is the lawyer testing Jesus, challenging him. And so often we read in the gospels of Jesus being tested like this: asked trick questions, asked loaded questions, asked questions constructed to try and make Jesus say something to incriminate himself in the eyes of the authorities.

Jesus turns it around and asks the lawyer, “What is written in the Law?... How do you read it?”

And the lawyer gives a good answer. Actually, he gives a great answer: In fact it’s the same answer that Jesus himself gives when challenged about which is the greatest commandment. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” – an answer that combines two verses from the Jewish Law – Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5.

The lawyer is not really impressed how Jesus has deflected his clever question, so in verse 29, wants to justify himself and challenges Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

In response to the lawyer’s challenge, Jesus launches into the story that we all know so well. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.”

And then Jesus tells him about the first two people to who encounter the robbed man – the priest and the Levite. They each see him, and cross to the other side of the road.

Now you’ve probably heard various explanations of why they would have done that. It might have been that they realised the danger from bandits and didn’t want to linger even a moment in case they were robbed and beaten too.

Or it may have been that they had important tasks to do. That they were heading for the temple where they had teach, perhaps. A couple of times I’ve stopped and helped people change tyres by the side of the road – particularly those that looked they might have difficulty doing it themselves. Flat tyres don’t happen very often these days, but I’m happy enough to help.

But if it was at 9 o’clock on a Sunday morning on Horace Street... I think I’d probably think “Well, I’d better get to church – someone else will be along to help them soon enough.”

And the Priest and the Levite may well have thought something like that.

Or it may have been that the priest and the Levite thought the man may have been dead or about to die. And in Jewish law, touching a dead body renders a person ritually unclean. So

they may have been not simply delayed in their duties, but actually unable to perform them.

And again, they may have thought “well, someone else will be along soon enough”

And sure enough, someone was – but that someone was a Samaritan. Someone from a group the Jews hated – and someone from a group that hated Jews. But Jesus tells us that the Samaritan went near the man, saw him, and took pity on him.

Despite the victim being from a hated group, he was moved with pity, and he tended to him. Why would he do such a thing?

A few of years ago, I read a book titled “One fourteenth of an elephant”, an account of British Prisoners-Of-War on the Burma railway. An engaging, but necessarily gruesome book. One of the scenes that really stuck in my mind was a group of POWs detailed to unload trains: One day they opened a wagon, only to find it crammed with wounded Japanese soldiers. They had no food, no water, no medical care. The Imperial Japanese Army had found them unfit for service, and just put them on a train to get them out of the way.

Obviously, every Japanese soldier was hated by every POW. With good reason. The Japanese Army had treated their prisoners with incredible cruelty. And yet, the British POWs took pity on those wounded Japanese soldiers. They lifted their wounded enemies out of the train, cleaned them and bound their wounds, and shared water and tea with them.

I think that’s the sort of pity that the good Samaritan showed toward the Jewish man. Despite the history, despite the circumstances, they were moved to act. They saw a need, and they acted. And in fact, in our reading, we heard that the Samaritan had the resources to go much further, to take the man to safety and to pay for his ongoing care.

Of course, we know the story: man robbed and beaten. Priest ignores him. Levite ignores him. Samaritan saves him. Wow, what a surprise! Go and be like the Samaritan.

Is that what we should take from this parable? Well, yes, but I think there’s more to it than that.

The story began when Jesus was challenged by the lawyer, “who is my neighbour?”, and when the story was ended, Jesus had a challenge for the lawyer “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

Jesus has turned the question around instead of answering “Who is my neighbour?”, Jesus asked “who was the neighbour?”

We know the answer. It’s obvious. It’s easy for us to come up with the right answer.

But it wouldn’t have been for the lawyer.

Because the one who was the neighbour was the Samaritan. The despised and hated Samaritan. In fact, if you read verse 37, when the lawyer answers Jesus, he doesn't even say "the Samaritan", instead he said simply "The one who showed him mercy".

Martin Luther King Junior famously said, "I imagine that the first question the priest and Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But by the very nature of his concern, the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

(Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love)

And that's something I think we can reflect on. We can't solve all the world's problems, but there are some things that we can do. So sometimes we need to ask ourselves, "If we don't help this person, what will happen to him or her?", "if we don't do this good thing, what will happen?", "if we don't share the good news of Jesus with people, what will happen?"

Pope Francis put it like this: "Like the Good Samaritan, may we not be ashamed of touching the wounds of those who suffer, but try to heal them with concrete acts of love."

We have to wonder what would have happened if the situation was reversed: if this lawyer had come across a robbed and beaten Samaritan lying by the side of the road, would he have helped? Interesting to ponder, but that's not how Jesus told it; instead it was someone very much like the lawyer lying by the side of the road, and it was the Samaritan who was his unexpected saviour.

That man lying by the side of the road didn't do anything to help himself. He couldn't do anything to help himself. I can imagine him lying there in the dust and seeing the priest approach, hoping for help, maybe crying or moaning, maybe reaching out, only to see the priest move to the far side of the road and hurry past.

And the same thing happening again when the Levite approached.

The priest and the Levite should have been the ones to help the man. They certainly would have known the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. And they certainly would have had the financial means to help.

They could have helped. They should have helped. But they chose not to.

And then the man would have seen the Samaritan approaching. And he may well have thought that this was the end for him. He probably would have expected the Samaritan to rifle through whatever he had left, and finish him off with a dagger or with another beating.

But the Samaritan was the man's saviour. His unexpected saviour.

The good Samaritan did a good deed. But he was not expected to. And I think that's why this parable has become the most famous one. It's the reason we get 'Good Samaritans' mentioned in news headlines across the world - because I think most of us, if not all of us,

can relate to it. We might not have been rescued from the side of the road, but if we think about it, we can probably remember we've been unexpectedly helped by strangers.

And I hope that we've all been a good Samaritan like that from time to time too. Again, maybe it's not helping a mugging victim, but it's doing those unexpected things. Loving our neighbours, and not limiting who our neighbours might be. The lawyer said the one who showed mercy was the man's neighbour, and Jesus told him – and us – to go and do likewise.

Help doesn't always come from the expected places. People often expect to be helped by the established institutions of the world. Governments. Charities. Churches. Families. Banks and the wealth that they hold for us.

And while those things can help, and often do, they're not what not what saves us. Because our salvation comes from Jesus – and only from Jesus. Jesus who stretched out his arms on the cross for us all.

If we think about it in historical terms, Jesus was very much an unexpected saviour. Sure, the nation of Israel was expecting a saviour of some sort – a messiah – but they weren't expecting one like Jesus.

And given the state of the world – then and now – you wouldn't expect God all-powerful to send his only Son into that world to save it.

Just like the good Samaritan, Jesus was an unexpected saviour. In fact, he was the unexpected saviour. An unexpected saviour for an undeserving world. And he is our unexpected saviour.

When we are lying by the roadside of all the problems of our lives, he comes to us, even though we don't deserve his help, even though we've done nothing to earn it.

He comes as an unexpected saviour to us all. All we need to do is accept him.

And having accepted him, having accepted his help and his mercy, all we need do is respond to his command to go and do likewise.

Amen.