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December 4th: Isaiah 47 & Luke 10:25-42

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The humbling of the proud virgin of Babylon. The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 47. Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon. Sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans.

For you shall no more be called tender and delicate. Take the millstones and grind flour. Put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, pass through the rivers.

Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one. Our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts is His name, is the Holy One of Israel.

Sit in silence and go into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms. I was angry with my people, I profaned my heritage, I gave them into your hand, you showed them no mercy, on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. You said, I shall be mistress forever, so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end.

Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sits securely, who say in your heart,

I am and there is no one besides me, I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children. These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day, the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments. You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, no one sees me.

Your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, I am and there is no one besides me. But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away, disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone, and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing. Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries, with which you have laboured from your youth.

Perhaps you may be able to succeed, perhaps you may inspire terror. You are wearied with your many counsels, let them stand forth and save you. Those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you, behold, they are like stubble, the fire consumes them, they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame.

No coal for warming oneself is this, no fire to sit before. Such to you are those with whom you have laboured, who have done business with you from your youth. They wander about, each in his own direction.

There is no one to save you. Chapters 41-48 of Isaiah are a sustained argument for monotheism, presenting the Lord as supreme over all of the false gods, their images and their worshippers, unique as the creator of all, the master of history, and as the one whose sovereignty will be publicly demonstrated, so that all knees would bow before him. The Lord's sovereignty would especially be demonstrated in the humiliation of the false gods of the nations, and as the Lord's word declared long in advance concerning Cyrus proved effective and true.

Chapter 46 described the shaming of Bel and Nebo, chief gods of the Babylonians, and the futility of idolatry more generally. In chapter 47, the focus turns to the city of Babylon itself. In the earlier oracles against the nations, in chapters 13-23, Babylon was especially prominent.

It headed the list of the people subject to the Lord's judgement, with Tyre at its conclusion. Chapters 13 and 14 are almost entirely devoted to judgement upon Babylon, with Babylon mentioned again in chapter 21. The oracles against the nations, while probably largely delivered in the years running up to 701 BC, when Sennacherib and the Assyrians would come up against Jerusalem, also seem to foreshadow the later judgements that would occur at the end of the 7th century and during the 6th, with the rise and fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Here however, in chapter 47, the fall of Babylon to Cyrus in 539 BC is more directly

foretold. In the earlier oracles against the nations, we saw that Babylon and Tyre were great world cities of their day, their glory and splendour setting them apart from other cities upon the land and the sea respectively. As such, they could stand for the Lord's judgement upon the pride of man more generally.

In chapters 24-27, we also saw something akin to the archetypal opposition between the city of man and the city of God. Given Babylon's prominence and significance, it was a potent symbol of the city of man, and as John Oswald notes, as the antipole of the city of God, its downfall was an oracle of salvation for Zion. As such a symbol, the passages concerning Babylon's downfall resonate long after Babylon's day, not least in the book of Revelation, where the city that is overthrown in the Lord's judgement at the end of the age is referred to as Babylon the Great.

Babylon is represented as a wealthy young virgin, accustomed to the luxury that comes with its privileged status. Zion is also often pictured in a similar manner. The Lord will utterly humiliate Babylon in its pride, devastating it and stripping it of its former glories.

The virgin, who formerly enjoyed all of the finery of nobility, would be reduced to grinding flour at the millstone, some of the most menial of work as a slave. She would be divested of her garments as a rich woman, and would have to dress as a regular labourer walking through the irrigated fields. Babylon's nakedness would be uncovered.

Such descriptions are used elsewhere of the humiliation of proud cities, for instance of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16, verses 36-39. Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out, and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated, I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as women who commit adultery, and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy.

And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places, they shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels and leave you naked and bare. Uncovering nakedness is an image of shame and the greatest humiliation, perhaps also implying rape. The image also suggests exposure of the true character of the city, especially in its moral character.

Babylon will be seen for what it is. Verse 4 frames the declaration of Babylon's downfall as a glorious message of salvation for Israel. The great oppressor city is being overthrown by the Lord, and the oppressed are, by implication, being liberated.

Verses 5-11 present a series of indictments against Babylon and the consequent sentence that will be enacted upon her. In the statements that the Lord attributes to

Babylon, it is evident that Babylon in its pride fancied that it was as God. I shall be mistress forever, and I am and there is no one besides me.

In making these claims, Babylon is attributing to itself what is only true of God, directly attacking the uniqueness of his deity and parodying his own words concerning himself. If these chapters are focused upon the monotheistic claim that the Lord alone is God, against all pretenders to his throne, Babylon is another of the powers claiming of itself what belongs to God alone. If Babylon enjoys glorious might and splendour, it is only because the Lord has established them in his providence.

Yet Babylon was unwitting of the fact that all its majesty and dominance was received from the Lord's hand and could just as easily be removed. He had empowered Babylon to be his instrument of judgment upon his unfaithful people. However much as the axe of Assyria was earlier judged by the Lord, so Babylon would also be humbled for its pride and presumption.

Babylon fancies itself invulnerable and hubristically imagines itself beyond the reach of the Lord's judgment. Its majesty would never fade, its might would never fail. It considered itself immune to the depredations that it inflicted upon others.

It would never be bereaved and bereft as they were. It was secure at the pinnacle of the food chain. It would never be widowed, stripped of the power of kings and gods, nor lose its children, its people falling at the hands of foreign powers.

Apart from its military might, Babylon believed that it enjoyed further protection on account of its sorceries, like a force field surrounding it on all sides. It felt secure in its idolatry, oppressive might, wicked enchantments, and the shrewdness of its wisdom. By these things it considered itself to be in control and that nothing could displace it from the top of the pile.

They also discounted a god or any other power who could expose their sin and hold them accountable for it. No one sees me. Yet evil would come upon the city that fancied itself secure in its evil.

All of a sudden it would be struck with disaster, from which there would be no escape, and for which there would be no atonement. Having declared the futility of their enchantments, the Lord sarcastically encourages Babylon to throw its weight into its sorceries and magic nonetheless. Perhaps it will work out for them.

Perhaps their magic will prove a match for the creator of all. Likewise maybe the stargazers and astrologers of Babylon would secure its deliverance in its hour of need. Of course all such bases of trust are vain and would fail Babylon in the hour of the Lord's visitation.

They would all be like stubble before the terrible consuming fire of the Lord's judgment

when he arrived. They would be entirely forsaken by those in whom they had once trusted, abandoned by any to whom they would have once looked for deliverance. A question to consider.

How does this chapter expose some of the ways that a nation can make an idol or false god of itself? The first question is, how does this question of the idol or false god of itself answer? The answer is, that it is a man who has gone down from Jerusalem to Jericho and has fallen among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, Take care of him, and whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back. Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers? He said, The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him, You go, and do likewise.

Now as they went on their way Jesus entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she went up to him and said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.

But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. The parable of the Good Samaritan found at the end of Luke chapter 10 is perhaps one of the most famous in Christian imagination.

In response to a lawyer's question about what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks him what his understanding of the law is. The implication here is that observing the law is the means to inherit eternal life. The lawyer gives a good answer to Jesus' question, focusing upon the fulfilment of the first and the second great commandments, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus is not setting up the lawyer for a Protestant gotcha at this point. Observing the law really is the means to inherit eternal life. Note the word inherit, it's not earn.

Eternal life comes as a gift, even if it is a gift that must be received. And when the

lawyer presents a follow-up question designed to absolve himself from the responsibility of love for neighbour, Jesus does not suggest that the law requires perfect, absolute obedience. Rather, he challenges the man's limited understanding of love and neighbour.

None of this should threaten Protestants who rightly recognise that the law was always fulfilled with faith. The law was never a matter of earning salvation through sinless obedience. It made ample provision for sin, and it was designed for a sinful people to come near to God and know forgiveness and cleansing for their sin.

One of the things that Jesus is doing here is challenging a false conception of the law that diverts the law from its true end and purpose, and displacing such things as justice, mercy, faith, forgiveness and righteousness becomes a system of self-exculpation, of self-justification, that actually avoids duty to neighbour. The Levite and the priest were men associated with serving in the temple. They probably avoided the half-dead man, in part because they feared being rendered unclean by touching a corpse and having to suspend their temple duties for a time.

Ritual purity was far more important to them than the imperative of love. The religiously compromised Samaritan, by contrast, had compassion upon the half-dead man. His act of mercy is a truer sacrifice than the compassionless ceremonial purity of the other two men.

And the lawyer wants to present himself as being in the right relation to the law. He wants to limit the scope of its definition of neighbour. Jesus answers him by pointing to an act of neighbour-making, an act that does not constrain its moral concern to a very carefully defined scope, but which goes out of its way to form new bonds.

This is only possible for people who are not trying to justify themselves. This expansion of moral concern for anyone trying to justify themselves will only produce guilt. And Jesus turns the lawyer's question around.

The real question is not, who is my neighbour? But, implicitly, am I a neighbour? When we read this passage, there are a number of things that call out for attention, not least the fact that there seems to be a superfluity of information and details that seem to detract from the force of the parable, rather than add to it, seemingly distracting us from the central point. Why does Jesus give us all this detail if it is irrelevant? Is Jesus just telling a story merely as an example of how we should show love for neighbour? If he were doing so, why did he put in all these extra details? Why mention a road from a specific place to a specific place, Jerusalem to Jericho? Why that particular road? Why those particular places? Why mention that it was a Samaritan? What role does that play in the story? Why mention the Levite and the priest? Why, for instance, mention the innkeeper, the oil and wine? Why not just say that the man himself, the Samaritan, took care of the man who had been caught among thieves? The innkeeper seems to be an

interruption, an unnecessary detail in the story, that distracts us from what should be the centre of the attention. There seems to be more going on here, then, and I suggest we should pay attention to the details, because they open things up.

First of all, there are structural details to note in Luke, that can help us to understand what's going on here. This is not the only account of a question about how to inherit eternal life. We find another one in chapter 18.

It's a question raised by a rich person, which Jesus answers by listing certain elements of the law, and then saying what else the rich man must do. Reading those accounts together, you can see that they function as bookends. They correspond to each other.

The other thing we might notice is that the next time we have this question about inheriting eternal life, we encounter the road from Jericho to Jerusalem shortly afterwards. Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem at this time, and on the way, near the beginning, he tells the story of the good Samaritan who goes from Jerusalem to Jericho, and at the other end, we have Jesus coming towards Jericho on the way to Jerusalem, so that he's travelling the same road that he speaks about in this parable. As he nears Jericho, he meets a man by the side of the road, a man who calls for mercy.

While all the other people are passing by, Jesus takes compassion on him. The fact that Jesus is going in the opposite direction is fitting within this bookend pattern. It suggests that Jesus' journey to Jerusalem will somehow complete the interrupted journey undertaken by the man of the parable.

So there's a symmetry here, and it helps us to read the story better. It's also worth recognising that in the previous chapter, Jesus had not been welcomed by the Samaritans, because they saw that he had set his face towards Jerusalem. Samaritans also appear at other points.

There is another good Samaritan within the Gospel of Luke. There is a leper who returns to give thanks, and he is a Samaritan. So the Samaritans are part of the story that Luke is telling.

They're not just a generic outside group that is particularly unloved. In the Book of Acts, Luke places a lot of importance upon the conversion of the Samaritans. The Gospel goes to Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

Samaria is a part of the story that is often not given enough attention. What's so significant about it? Samaria represents the fallen northern kingdom of Israel, to some extent. The Samaritan is not just a generic outsider, but the closest outsider.

He has some relationship to the Jews, and is connected with false worship. There's a sort of breach in the family and corruption through intermarriage and syncretism. Between the Jews and the Samaritans is some tension that has a character of brotherly rivalry.

The Samaritans are the corrupted brothers. This, I believe, helps us to understand some of the background to this story. When we go back to 2 Chronicles 28, we find a story that lies behind this parable.

In that account, the king of Judah has proved unfaithful. He's an idolater. He's brought Judah into false worship.

He has handed over into the power of the king of Syria, and also the king of Israel. In the context of this great defeat, something very significant happens. In 2 Chronicles 28, verses 5-15, we read... The king's son, Anasaqam, the commander of the palace, and Elkanah, the next in authority to the king.

The men of Israel took captive 200,000 of their relatives, women, sons, and daughters. They also took much spoil from them, and brought the spoil to Samaria. But a prophet of the Lord was there, whose name was Oded.

And he went out to meet the army that came to Samaria, and said to them, Behold, because the Lord, the God of your fathers, was angry with Judah, He gave them into your hand. But you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. And now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves.

Have you not sins of your own against the Lord your God? Now hear me, and send back the captives from your relatives whom you have taken, for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you. Certain chiefs, also of the men of Ephraim, Azariah the son of Johanan, Berachiah the son of Meshillamoth, Jehiskiah the son of Shalem, and Amasa the son of Hadley, stood up against those who were coming from the war, and said to them, You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring upon us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins and guilt. For our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel.

So the armed men left the captives and the spoil before the princes and all the assembly. And the men who have been mentioned by name rose and took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees.

Then they returned to Samaria. Having just read the parable of the Good Samaritan, there are a number of details in this passage in 2nd Chronicles that should spark our attention. There are people who, as it were, are caught among thieves.

There are Good Samaritans, an intervention by Oded, the prophet of the Lord, that leads to the Good Samaritans, clothing the men of Judah, giving them sandals, providing them food and drink, anointing them, carrying the feeble among them on donkeys, just as the

Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable carried the men caught among thieves on his beast. Then they bring them back to Jericho, the city of palm trees, and they return to Samaria. The places are significant in the story too.

In Jesus' parable, the man goes from Jerusalem to Jericho. In 2nd Chronicles, chapter 28, the army goes up from Jerusalem and ends up in Jericho. When we see such details that connect two stories together, or two events, we should think about what they mean.

By themselves, they may seem just rather odd. Is there some way in which this connection helps us to understand what's taking place in the parable? As I've noted, the Samaritan is not just a generic outsider. He's a member of a group that represents, in part, the Northern Kingdom that had fallen into idolatry and captivity, and become admixed with other unfaithful people through intermarriage and false worship.

There's going to be a union in the story of the Good Samaritan, and we see a hint of this in the Old Testament, as God works in that broken nation and gives them an understanding of their brotherhood. As we look through the story of the later kings, in both Kings and Chronicles, so many of the stories play out in the shadow of the great breach in the Kingdom. In this one short story, however, towards the end of the final book of the history of Israel and Judah, we find an episode where the two are brought together, where for a brief period of time, they realise that they are brothers, that they exist within the same family, and where, through a remarkable act of mercy, they understand for a brief moment what it means to be a united people.

This is a glimpse of what it means for Israel to be restored, for the Northern Kingdom to show mercy and compassion to the Southern Kingdom, and for there to be a blessing and a healthy neighbourliness between two parts of a broken heritage. So then, looking at the parable of the Good Samaritan, you can see the work of God restoring Israel and Judah, bringing together this broken Kingdom through the work of Christ. In this act of mercy, in this act of neighbour-making, there's a new people being formed, just as for a short period of time, there was appreciation of the brotherhood between the Northern and the Southern Kingdom, in 2 Chronicles 28.

The inclusion of the Samaritans within the blessing of the new covenant, then, is an important part of the restoration of Israel as one true nation. This is something promised in the Prophets. The attention that Luke will later give to the coming of the Spirit upon the Samaritans in Acts 8 is not accidental, nor is the presence of Samaritans in the story of Luke.

Luke is setting us up for the place of the Samaritans within the larger picture of the coming of the Kingdom. The Church is formed with Judeans and Samaritans being brought together. It's a restoration of the people of God, a bringing together of a divided people, and this is part of what's taking place in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

What does this have to do with the point of the parable? About being a neighbour? The question raised at the end of the parable is not, who is my neighbour? But, who was a neighbour? And the question is heightened by the further question, with whom do I identify in the story? With the man caught among thieves? He's a Judean. With the law-observant priest and Levite? Or do I identify with the Good Samaritan? The question is, how am I going to be part of the restoration of the people of God? This restoration that is taking place in the relationship between the Good Samaritan and the Judean, these two groups that had formerly been at enmity being brought together. Now there are a great many things taking place here.

Some have observed the parable of the Good Samaritan is in part a commentary upon Hosea 6, verse 6, for I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. The pouring on of oil and wine is a sacrificial action. It's something that you might do in acting towards a sacrifice.

The priest and the Levite are characters associated with the cultic worship of Israel. These are people who would be serving in the temple, and in their refusal to come close to the man who has fallen among thieves, going by on the other side of the road, they may be trying to keep ritual purity. The Good Samaritan, on the other hand, is acting with mercy and compassion, and in his compassion a sacrificial pattern is being played out.

He's treating the man to whom he is showing mercy as if he were a sacrifice. There are other odd details in this parable, though. Perhaps the most surprising is the attention given to the character of the innkeeper.

If you were telling the story, perhaps if you were asked to retell the story of the Good Samaritan, you might forget the character of the innkeeper. He's like the older brother in the parable of the lost son. He tends to get missed out because we focus on the welcome that the father gives to the son who has returned from exile in the far country, but the parable ends on a strange note, with the attention focused on the older brother who does not welcome the returning brother.

Similarly, this parable ends not with attention given to the character of the Good Samaritan, or even to the man caught among thieves, but to a different character. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, take care of him, and whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back. For many understandings of the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable would be stronger if we omitted this character altogether.

That is probably a sign that they're missing something very important. We should read with the grain of scripture and ask questions about why certain things are included, why tell a story in this particular way, why include this detail rather than that, why use this expression rather than that one. We're often inclined to read Jesus' stories as moral

fables, focusing upon isolated details or one single moral thrust.

That's not often how they work. Generally they're giving us something far more than this. They have a number of different figures or elements, and they're placed in a symbolic matrix that helps us to make sense of many different characters in concert with each other.

We've already considered that God is restoring Israel by bringing together Samaritans and Jews. He's restoring that breach. And the question the parable poses, in part, is where are you going to fit into that project? Are you going to be one of the people that shows compassion to your neighbour and finds yourself part of this restored people, a people formed in the true obedience to the law, in acts of compassion and mercy, or are you going to align yourself with the Levite and the priest? But there's more going on here, and the innkeeper, I think, clues us into that.

The innkeeper is a figure that might be viewed with some distrust in that time, much as a Samaritan might have been. The innkeeper might trick people out of money, which makes us wonder why the Samaritan is showing such trust in him. The good Samaritan makes the innkeeper a participant in his act of showing mercy.

He gives him money. He entrusts the innkeeper with the injured man. The innkeeper could just take the money and leave the man on the street.

But it is expected that the innkeeper, even though he may be a figure that's not trusted in that society, shows mercy to the one he's expected to. Perhaps we're supposed to see some significance in the fact that he performs a sort of sacrificial action upon the man, and then he brings the man to an innkeeper. Maybe the innkeeper is being contrasted and compared with the priest so that the inn is a sort of true temple, a place of provision for the person in need, and all of that might be beneath the surface.

St. Augustine suggested some connection between the innkeeper and the church, and maybe between the coins and the sacraments. That's not, in principle, a crazy interpretation, even though the second part, I think, goes too far. Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, we have Jesus as a king who goes away and gives money to his people, tells them to do business until he returns.

Here we have something similar. There is money given to someone who is told to act faithfully until the giver returns, at which time there will be repayment and blessing for faithfulness. Maybe this should help us to see that the character of the innkeeper connects with the character of the Good Samaritan, so that the Good Samaritan and the innkeeper are one unit, much as Christ is connected with his church.

Christ gives these responsibilities and these gifts to the church in order that it might continue and might carry on his act of mercy. Go and do likewise is, in part, go and take

up that role of the innkeeper. Go and take up the money, the resources, the gifts, the talents that have been given to you and continue Christ's act of mercy.

That might be part of what's taking place here. And one way or another, the character of the innkeeper should be part of our interpretation. The story does not end in verse 34.

It ends at the end of verse 35. And in that verse, there is a continuation of the Good Samaritan's act. And so the details that many would see as extraneous or superfluous, the details of the donkey, the oil and the wine, the reference to Jerusalem and Jericho, the fact that the story is focused upon a Samaritan, all of these are important to the story.

Along with the sacrificial details, the detail of the innkeeper, etc., they are not, in fact, extraneous. They help us to understand that there is more here taking place than we might originally have thought. And there's a deep Old Testament and theological background for what's occurring that helps us to see what God is doing in Christ in this moment in history.

God is restoring his people. He's overcoming the breaches. And the true fulfillment of the law, the true sacrifice that the Lord is looking for, is found in acts of compassion and love for neighbour.

Luke 10 ends with a discussion of Mary and Martha. Mary takes the place of learning before Christ, a place that would more typically be restricted to men in that culture. Mary and Martha can easily be read in terms of the typical double bind that's placed upon women, the expectation to serve, accompanied by the judgment that they should be more like Mary.

But I don't think this is the point of the story. The story should be read with the parable that precedes it. Both are shaped by the theme of inheritance.

The lawyer wants to know what to do to inherit, while Mary has chosen the good portion. Like the priest and the Levite, Martha is preoccupied with offering bread. The Samaritan appreciates that compassion is more important than sacrifice, and Mary that the one who dwells in the temple is greater than the service of that temple.

Martha, like many in the Gospels, judges Jesus' followers for failure of expected service, while missing the fact that God has visited his people and that he must take priority. A question to consider. How might the parable of the Good Samaritan's emphasis upon love for neighbour differ from liberal society's emphasis upon universal love for humanity?