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May 19th: Deuteronomy 20 & Luke 10:25-42

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The laws of warfare. The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 20. When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them. For the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people, and shall say to them, Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies. Let not your heart faint. Do not fear or panic, or be in dread of them.

For the Lord your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory. Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he

die in the battle, and another man enjoy its fruit.

And is there any man who has betrothed the wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her. And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, Is there any man who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own. And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.

When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it, and if it responds to you peaceably, and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labour for you, and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. And when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword.

But the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves, and you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods.

And so you sin against the Lord your God. When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down.

Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siege works against the city that makes war with you until it falls. In Deuteronomy chapter 20 we have laws relating to warfare falling under the rubric of the sixth commandment. When Israel goes out to war, the priests must address the people on behalf of the Lord.

They must assure the people of the Lord's strength and assistance in their conflict. They are assured so that they need not be afraid. And then at that point, the officers speak to the people and they go through the camp to find out four kinds of persons who are then told to go home.

First, the person who has built a house and not lived in it yet. Second, the person who has planted a vineyard and not tasted its fruits. Third, the person who has betrothed the wife and not taken her.

And fourth, the person who is fearful, who might make others fearful. The first three are told to go home for their own private sake. It seems strange to us.

Why send them home? Why care particularly about the death of persons under such circumstances? Surely death is the greatest tragedy whenever and whoever it hits. What does that little bit of extra tragedy really count relative to it? However, what is highlighted here are some of the things that people live for and find value and a meaning in. Building a house and settling down somewhere.

Planting a vineyard and reaping the fruits of the land. And then marrying and starting a family. These are the sorts of ends that people work towards in their lives.

The sorts of goals that give life meaning and value. It's a tragedy if you come close to these things and don't actually achieve them. In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 30 it speaks about these specific instances.

And the judgment that will befall Israel if it is not faithful. You shall betroth the wife but another man shall ravish her. You shall build a house but you shall not dwell in it.

You shall plant a vineyard but you shall not enjoy its fruit. Now implicit in that text is the fact that you'll be dead. If you're dead, why care about these things? Because the meaning of our lives has a lot to do with our enjoyment of the fruits of our labours.

A life that is characterized by futility is not a good life. The Lord, having brought his people into the land, wants his people to enter in to rest in their labours. Israel has been given inheritance of the land by the Lord.

And it is important that they don't refrain from enjoying it. We should observe the democratic nature of this law. It's addressed to any man, however rich or poor, who might have just fallen short of entering into rest in his labours.

The rest that belongs to the people of God. He must be allowed to enjoy his Sabbath while his companions labour and fight for him. The people must be careful to guard the work of their neighbours from the potential of futility.

The exemptions are presented in a way that highlights the risk of someone losing his enjoyment of the benefits of rest in the land to another man. The commitment here is not to let this happen to anyone. And it binds the Israelite men together in a sort of commitment to brotherhood.

This is not to be a society of every man for himself. What is this somewhat strange law doing under the principle of not murdering? The commandment itself is framed by the notion of fear in verses 1, 3 and 8. It protects, we could say, the stuff of life. So that life and its fruitfulness is always prioritised and we don't end up allowing the fear of death to eclipse everything else.

The work of war to quench the enjoyment of the rest that belongs to the people of God. The urgency of combat to condemn people's labours to futility. Some people need to go to war to put themselves in the line of fire but it is important that we jealously value and guard the milestones that give meaning to our lives.

Hebrews chapter 2 verse 15 speaks of the fear of death as a means by which the devil holds people in slavery. Israel must not operate out of a fear that is simply preoccupied with the enemy of death, with the enemy at the border, but must operate out of a commitment to protect and value the good life that God has given them, the rest that God has granted them within the land. Aversion to death is not the same thing as the valuing of life.

This law placed under the sixth commandment teaches Israel that not murdering also involves protecting and valuing the conditions of shalom, of peace and life where they can, even in and perhaps especially in the precarious times of war. The relationship between this and the principle of not fearing is important. Deliverance from bondage to the fear of death requires trust in God.

This doesn't mean that there is nothing to fear in death or that great sacrifices don't need to be made. The people who do go out to fight would be putting their lives in jeopardy. They would come back and they would not be sleeping with their wives.

They would not be eating the fruit of their vineyard. They would not be enjoying the security and rest of their house. However, in a society that was vigilant to ensure that every person did get to enjoy these things, their lives would not be characterized by futility.

This sort of approach was only possible for Israel when they did not lose sight of the fact that they served a God who was greater and more powerful than the forces of death. When Israel attacked a city outside of the land, they had to offer it terms of peace first, terms that were rather harsh by any modern standards but not by those of the day. Israel was given strict limits upon the sort of warfare that they were permitted to engage in, so attacking cities in such a manner would not be typical but would generally be a response to aggression on the part of the other nation.

Israel was not an expansive imperialistic power. Cities of the land were not offered, however, the same terms. What exactly is involved here should be considered.

We shouldn't necessarily assume that the entire population of the Canaanites were being eliminated. That clearly didn't happen. Still less that ethnic cleansing was the goal.

The emphasis throughout is upon the behaviour of the Canaanites and Israelite cities would be subject to the same fate if they sinned in a similar way. We should also consider that most of the population of the lands did not live in the cities, or in many

cases we might think of them as citadels which Israel attacked. Israel clearly left many of the people of the land while utterly annihilating their centres of power and their rulers.

We can see something of this in 2 Chronicles 8-7-8. All the people who were left of the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites who were not of Israel from their descendants who were left after them in the land, whom the people of Israel had not destroyed, these Solomon drafted as forced labour and so they are to this day. Was the continued existence of these people in the land proof of Israel's unfaithfulness? Not necessarily.

We also see Canaanites who became members of Israel, perhaps most notably someone like Rahab, but also people like Uriah the Hittite. Israel's warfare in the land was a divinely mandated war against idolatry and it had to be uncompromising, giving no quarter. And Israel are seen as the instruments of the Lord's judgement.

They are not conducting this war on their own terms, they're not conducting this war for their own sake. They must obey the Lord, even when it's difficult. Placing this material under the 6th commandment is really striking.

If the 6th commandment calls us not to murder, surely this directly contravenes it. Yet careful reflection reveals a more complicated view. While this does challenge the absolutism of many forms of pacifism, by situating the commands of warfare under the commandment not to murder, it demands that we reflect carefully upon the relationship between these two things and the way in which warfare itself should be carried out in a way that honours life, that maintains a commitment not to murder, even in that situation where it may seem to be suspended.

This is not a suspension of the commandment not to murder. Rather, even in the context of war, where life may legitimately be taken, the force of the 6th commandment must still be felt. Scripture recognises but places limits upon the necessity of war in a fallen, sinful world.

The principles here cannot and should not be spiritualised away. The struggle against spiritual evils in the world sometimes requires killing persons who have committed themselves to advancing those evils. Just as Genesis chapter 9 mandates the death penalty in the context of the prohibition of murder, so Deuteronomy chapter 20 mandates war in the same sort of context.

All of this requires careful discrimination and the recognition that war, like everything else in the life of Israel, falls under the rule of the law and its principles of righteous judgements. It must not be treated merely as an amoral exertion of power over others, nor as a straightforward permission that the Lord has extended to them, exempting them from the force of that commandment. The Christian tradition, taking this very seriously, has tried to subject warfare and its practice to the principles of justice.

It has talked about just war reflecting upon the ends of warfare, the manner of warfare, and other considerations and discriminations that help us to speak appropriately about the character of warfare, about its evils, about some things that may be permissible and even necessary in the waging of warfare that are nonetheless not good in themselves, results of being in a fallen universe. Taking life in warfare is not necessarily sinful. Indeed, under some situations it may be a righteous thing to do, and something praiseworthy.

But in Scripture, peace takes priority over war, and men of warfare bear the stains of the tragedy of the fall. Much of the Bible's teaching concerning war appalls modern sensibilities, even though within living memory, Britain firebombed Dresden, or America dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While our distance from these events may, I believe, help us rightly to see some of the brutality and the cruelty and the injustice that was characteristic of them, that same distance can make it difficult for us to perceive the necessary evils of war, profoundly sanguinary actions that may be legitimately undertaken, but with tragic and horrible consequence.

Overcoming the evils of the Nazi and Imperial Japanese regimes required the willful taking of a very great many lives. It is very easy looking at our distance to blanch at the horror of the actions required to dislodge evil, and it is essential that we recognize that Deuteronomy chapter 20 is not looking at matters from such a privileged, distanced vantage point. This chapter ends with another strange law.

It's a law about fruit trees. This law, again relating to warfare, prohibits wreaking devastation upon the land, engaging in a scorched earth policy. The tree is not your enemy.

Humanity is called to serve and to protect the land, and the principle of not murdering requires an active concern for the protection of nature from devastation, and carefully bounds the destructive forces of war. War can be undertaken in a way that cares nothing for the environment, that reduces the landscape to a hellscape. An example of this could be the Red Zone in France, 460 square miles that was utterly devastated by the First World War, and is largely still uninhabitable on account of unexploded ordinance and poisonous chemicals.

War may be a tragic necessity under some conditions, and even sometimes a moral imperative, but we should do what we can to protect life, not to allow everything to get sucked into the vortex of conflict and destruction. This chapter then presents bounds upon warfare, upon the people that are to be sent out to war, ensuring that war does not condemn people to futility, upon the forms of warfare to be adopted with different enemies, to ensure that not all peoples are treated as servants of great evils that must be absolutely uprooted, and finally upon the scope of warfare, to ensure that we do not engage in devastation of the good earth that God has given us. A question to consider,

how might we fill out the ecological concerns of this chapter elsewhere in scripture? Luke chapter 10 verses 25 to 42 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said to him, What is written in the law? How do you read it? And he answered, You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.

And he said to him, You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live. But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, And who is my neighbor? Jesus replied, A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell 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 neighbor 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, and 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 fulfillment of the first and the second great commandments, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor 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 neighbor, Jesus does not suggest that the law requires perfect absolute obedience.

Rather, he challenges the man's limited understanding of love and neighbor. None of this should threaten Protestants who rightly recognize 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 neighbor. 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 neighbor.

Jesus answers him by pointing to an act of neighbor-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 neighbor? But implicitly, am I a neighbor? 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 neighbor? 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 center 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 this 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 traveling 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 recognizing 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.

And this, I believe, helps us to understand some of the background to this story. When we go back to 2 Chronicles chapter 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. And he is handed over into the power of the king of Syria, and also the king of Israel.

And in the context of this great defeat, something very significant happens. In 2 Chronicles chapter 28, verses 5 to 15, we read... ..killed 120,000 from Judah in one day, all of them men of valor, because they had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers. And Zichri, a mighty man of Ephraim, killed Masiah, the king's son, and Azraqam, 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, Berechiah the son of Meshillamoth, Jehiskiah the son of Shalem, and Amasa the son of Hadlai, 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, 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 man 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 chapter 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 chapter 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 the 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 chapter 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're 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. 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 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. The Samaritans' emphasis upon love for neighbor differ from liberal society's emphasis

upon universal love for humanity.