

The EU Question

Sermon by Chris Bessant

10th July

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ 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 neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 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 while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the Lord your God by observing his

commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

In my short June article for the local parish magazine I wrote concerning the EU vote that: 'I would be more likely to vote with what I felt, than what I thought'. Or to put it another way, with my heart rather than my head. That is very unlike me, but I was left with little alternative. Alongside so many I had been subjected to a bewildering array of claims and counter-claims, highly-selective, subjective and misleading data, outright scare tactics that seemed assume that I was quite stupid, and ridiculous statements from some politicians that had me shouting at my radio and television in disgust. For such campaigning, I thought both sides of the debate were as bad as each other.

During the debate I resisted the temptation to preach theologically about how one might vote. Indeed, it would have been possible to take a faith perspective on either side of the debate. There was much I could have said, but also much that could have been misunderstood.

If you browse through both the Old and New Testaments you will not have to go far before you find all the same identity issues in biblical times. For example, consider when God granted the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants – an attractive land flowing with milk and honey – to which many would wish to migrate. Consider also when Jacob and his sons were forced to relocate to Egypt at a time of famine, where they were given a home, but then were treated as second-class citizens who

were exploited to provide comforts to the Egyptian higher society. Remember also how Moses switched sides to lead a campaign of exit to a new promised land. Our first reading from the Old Testament this morning reminds us that the Israelites were migrants too. Before crossing into the promised land Moses painted a very attractive picture that would surely have enticed many migrants to make a difficult journey: from the Book of Deuteronomy ‘The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil.’

In fact, all through the Old Testament, the story of the Israelites provides many parallels the stories of migration where God’s people have themselves been refugees, or later within their own borders they too had to be selective and compassionate towards those foreign to them. Consider these harsh words from the book of Exodus, when Moses addressed the Israelites:

‘Take care not to make a treaty with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare among you. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars. You shall not make a treaty with the inhabitants of the land for when they will sacrifice to their gods, invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifice. And you will not take wives from among their daughters for your sons.’

These are shocking things to our ears now, at a time when we seek peaceful cooperation. Behind these commandments is the wish to maintain racial and religious purity by avoiding the traditions and practices of those who live with us or near us. These words suppose that peaceful cooperation is possible, but that it will have the consequence of diluting what is seen as a particular set of national values. Exactly the same language has been used to try and maintain a sense of ‘Britishness’.

Thankfully, alongside these uncomfortable ideas in the Old Testament are also some commendable stories of acceptance and cooperation. There were in the days of early Israel a semi-nomadic tribe living in the land known as the Kenites. They were not Israelites themselves, but they seem to have been welcomed and accepted by the Israelites. It may have been that Moses was taken in by a Kenite clan when he fled from Egypt and lived in the desert as a shepherd; it seems also that he married a Kenite woman. During those years Moses was to see the burning bush and hear the commandments of God. History suggest that for centuries after the Kenites lived peacefully with the Israelites, but were always distinct from them. If we like to think of the past as neat national mono-identities, then our own history of Britain is a super-fire example of how that has never been the case.

In the New Testament era, at the time of Jesus, you will surely remember that the land of Israel was occupied by the Romans, who now considered it their land. In recent times there had been a huge influx of Greek speakers and culture into the land. Whole regions were developed and cities built quite apart from Jews identity. This led to many amongst the Jews to integrate with them, or in opposition to form into sometimes violent nationalist groups. All of this is very clear from the pages of the gospels. In Jesus' day, calls to maintain national purity were very common, and so there was a strong sense of 'them and us'. Recall the gospel story of the Good Samaritan we have just heard. Those Samaritans were not considered to be proper Jews at all, but rather more like a bunch of sold-out half breeds as far as many Jews were concerned – as so they were the subject of popular adversity. But taking the Samaritan point exactly, Jesus taught 'love your neighbour' and he taught how your neighbour might well be very different from you, and how that made no difference to the commandment.

Later, after Jesus had ascended to God, the church grew and spread regardless of borders and nationalities. In fact, historically the Christian Church is the greatest example of human integration and identity that it is possible to find. It's not perfect I grant you, and there are some dreadful examples to the contrary, but taken as a whole there has never been anything nearer to the ideal of 'love you neighbour' in human history than the Church thus far.

So the decision was made to leave the EU. We are being told that that is what will happen. But the paradigm of separation is not supposed to extend beyond political concerns into racial concerns. 'Love you neighbour' is not invalidated by the EU vote.

As the political parties sort themselves out and the exit strategy proceeds, I would like to see all of the following:

- Honest and respectful leadership in government that does not make the primary identifier of a person whether they are leave or remain. In the short term that is enviable, but in the long-term it will only maintain unhelpful divisions.
- We must have respect for the majority national will – the exit vote – and not to hold our democratic system in contempt by attempting to return to the question.
- According to the Archbishop of Canterbury: 'Cracks in the politeness and tolerance of our society has allowed an outwelling of hatred and poison on racial grounds.' So there must be firm dealing with the rise in racial abuse, which must be met with very sharp justice indeed.
- We must now use control of borders on compassionate grounds to favour genuine refugees before all else.

I'm both surprised and not surprised by what has happened in these last few weeks – what a turmoil it has been. I just wish to see, and I'm sure I can speak for us all, when I say that the Christian way of 'love your neighbour' has not been subject to any vote at all, and must remain a principal guide for our future governments.

Amen