ROBBER, VICTIM AND SAMARITAN[1]

A sermon preached by Professor Michael Horsburgh in Saint James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 10 July 2022

Someone asked the rabbi, 'Why do you always answer every question with another question?' To which the rabbi replied, 'Why not?' The practice of answering a question with a question is certainly a well-established middle eastern custom and one that lies at the centre of this morning's gospel, which includes the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The structure of the interchange is quite clear. A lawyer asks Jesus a question about inheriting eternal life and, in response, Jesus asks the lawyer what the scripture says. When the lawyer replies, Jesus challenges him to obey his own conclusion. The lawyer asks a second question, and the process is repeated. The parable we call 'The Good Samaritan' is the lead up to Jesus' second question in response to the lawyer. Thus the pattern is, twice over: question from the lawyer; counter question from Jesus; reply by the lawyer; challenge by Jesus.

This is an interesting and clever device that serves Jesus well. In the first place, Jesus, although under attack, treats the lawyer who questions him with respect for his learning and scholarship. He does not try to put him down, to demonstrate superior knowledge. Second, Jesus cleverly defends himself. Realising that he is under attack, Jesus ensures that all the answers have come from the questioner.

But where does Jesus want to arrive? Many people treat this parable as a simple moral tale of good behaviour, missing the central and remarkable shift that Jesus makes to the lawyer's original views. The shift is this. After the failure of his first attack, the lawyer asked his second question, 'And who is my neighbour?' The point of this question is to limit the effect of Jesus' first challenge, which seemed to commit the lawyer to an unlimited love of all and sundry. Surely, there must be some way of drawing a line around the open-ended commitment he was tricked into making. In effect, the lawyer is looking out on the world and trying desperately to categorise its inhabitants into neighbours and non-neighbours, with the neighbours being as few as possible and the non-neighbours as many as possible.

When Jesus has told his parable, he asks the lawyer his second question, which was, 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' Jesus turns the issue from one of defining who the neighbour is to one of being a neighbour yourself. Thus, the lawyers' attempt to objectify his neighbour by a form of definition was successfully subverted by Jesus. The lawyer originally saw the neighbour as the victim and himself as the helper. Jesus required him to see himself as the victim.[2]

In his analysis of the Good Samaritan, Karl Barth has this to say about the lawyer who asked the question that provoked the parable:

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[1] Readings: Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

[2] This discussion is dependent on Kenneth E Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, (combined volume with *Poet and Peasant*), Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983, pp. 33 - 56

> … the lawyer, who wants to justify himself and therefore does not know who is his neighbour, is confronted not by the poor wounded man with his claim for help, but by the anything but poor Samaritan who makes no claim at all but is simply helpful. It is the Samaritan who embodies what he wanted to know. This is the neighbour he did not know. All very unexpected: for the lawyer had first to see that he himself is the man fallen among thieves and lying helpless by the wayside. … He will then know who is his neighbour, and will not ask concerning him as though it were only a matter of the casual clarification of a concept.[3]

If that is the structure and function of the parable, what is its meaning? You may think that the meaning is plain: be nice and helpful to everyone you meet; after all, you may be in need some day. But don't be deceived, the meaning in the parables of Jesus is always different from what you think at first. Meaning has traditionally been given to this account on two levels: social and theological. The social meaning discusses how this parable addresses our responsibilities to each other. The theological meaning analyses the persons in the story to illuminate our relationship with God. How do these different forms of meaning work?[4]

If we consider first the social meaning of the story, we recognise immediately how it has entered our basic consciousness and cultural language. This story justifies good deeds and help offered unstintingly to others. Think about volunteers during our recent floods. From one point of view the story has an individualistic slant, encouraging everyone to care for others. This approach has at least two difficulties. The first is that it does not present anything like a reasonable policy for dealing with highway robbery on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. What is clearly needed is not more Samaritans, or even better-disposed priests and Levites. A better police service would be a good start. Better still, relief from the poverty caused by the oppressive Roman occupation and its associated taxes would go a long way towards removing the causes of highway robbery. A sensible social policy requires joint action and attention to causes.

The second difficulty is that, taken this way, the story does nothing to solve the lawyer's difficulty: there are so many potential recipients of neighbourly attention that my task as an individual is wellnigh impossible. I cannot single-handedly attend to all the needy persons who come across my path. For this reason, we need to be careful that we do not overly individualise the implications of the parable. Like most parables, this one deals with individuals; it is a story. We must not then assume that its application is restricted to individuals. Indeed, its original hearers would have made no such assumption. This is, in fact, a powerful argument for community action. As individuals we can do little. As a community, we are obliged to do much. Community ills require community action. The reciprocal nature of the parable demands this.

If we turn to the theological meaning, this parable issues a serious challenge to us in both our personal and our corporate lives. It does so by inviting us to identify with the Samaritan. Although, as a member of a despised group, the Samaritan was anathema to the lawyer, he was more like him, and us, than the lawyer might have acknowledged. He was fit, sufficiently rich and in the right place at the right time. He had to answer the question that the lawyer had posed: will I help or not? Two others in the story had already answered that question in the negative. But we would be selling this parable short if we assumed that this was the identification that we are principally asked to make. We must turn to the other main character, the man lying beside the road.

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[3] K Barth, 'The Doctrine of the Word of God', in *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part 2, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1956, pp. 417-19

[4] The danger in interpreting parables is balancing too much and too little. Too little might apply to a simple ethical interpretation. Too much might apply to extensive allegorical interpretation. Some appreciation of this problem can be found in Mike Higton, 'Boldness and reserve: a lesson from St Augustine', *Anglican Theological Review*, Summer 2003, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3818/is_200307/ai_n9265336/pg_1

What is most striking about this man is that neither the priest, nor the Levite, nor the Samaritan, nor the lawyer, nor we ourselves can say anything about him other than that he is in need. He cannot speak; he lies unconscious. His accent, tone of voice or language cannot identify him. He is stripped naked. His clothing cannot identify his class or ethnic identity. He is totally anonymous. Suppose we identify with him; what then? We give up the luxury of being powerful, fit and wealthy and become nothing and in the wrong place at the wrong time. Far from being an actor in our own story, we become its subject. We are, as he was, completely dependent.

In 2005, Australian, Gill Hicks, lost both her legs in terrorist bombings in London. She was subsequently interviewed by Andrew Denton on the ABC. She recounted precisely the experience to which this parable refers:

> ANDREW DENTON: Before you were identified, you were known as 'One Unknown', …
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> GILL HICKS: I think 'One Unknown' is to me so profound and such the embodiment of what it means to be stripped back, to have no label, to have no identity, to have no obvious sign of a faith that I practice or a colour of skin. People never gave up, resuscitating me, trying to do everything they could to save me, and I was an unknown person.[5]

This is the shift that Jesus provoked the lawyer to make. This identification is not simply a product of the story; it is a commentary on our very existence. It provokes us to realise that we are totally dependent, not only on our environment and on our fellow human beings, but on the sustaining power of God.

This parable holds in tension both our powerfulness and our weakness. In our power we are challenged to both individual and community concern, to neighbourliness. In our weakness we are sustained and enhanced. More than that, only our appreciation of our weakness can defend us from the abuse of our power. As Rowan Williams notes:

> C. S. Lewis once famously described a "charitable" person in these terms: "She lived for others; you could tell the others by their hunted look." We can think about our gifts as though they licensed us to impose what we had to give; we can think about our gifts as though we had nothing to receive; and we can think about our needs in dependent and immature ways.[6]

There are, however, some characters in this parable to whom we have, yet, given no attention. I refer to the robbers, those who assaulted the man in the first place. They are, as it were, the anti-Samaritans of the story. We will not wan to identify with them. Yet, the ambiguity of all the roles in this parable is played out on the walls of this very church.

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[5] Transcript *Enough Rope*, 2 July 2007: Gill Hicks makes a similar comment on the website of the Forgiveness Project: http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/gill-hicks

[6] Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, Louisville KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p. 109. See also http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3424, which is a reprint of the relevant chapter in his book.

On the west side of the north door is the large memorial tablet for the explorer Edmund Kennedy, who was also one of our parishioners. It was placed there by the Legislative Council of New South Wales in recognition of his ill-fated trip to Cape York in 1848.[7] It also commemorates his First Nation companion, Galmahra, of the Wonnarua people who lived in the area around Muswellbrook. He was known to the colonists as Jacky Jacky. After Kennedy was speared by the local inhabitants, Jack Jacky stayed by Kennedy's side until he died.[8] It may appear to us that Kennedy filled the role of victim and Jacky Jacky that of Samaritan in a re-enactment of this parable. Yet we must not fail to notice that the role of robbers was also taken by Aboriginals.

Somewhat more hidden from us is the role of Kennedy as robber. He was, as an explorer, the forerunner of the occupation of the lands of those who attacked him. If that is so, the Aboriginal contenders are also hidden victims. This analysis leads us to the conclusion that the Aboriginals were on the face of it, both robbers and Samaritan, while being hidden victims. We, the Europeans, are, on the face of it, the victim, but also the hidden robber. We are not, however, in this re-enactment, in the role of Samaritan at all. Finally, the erstwhile Samaritan, Jacky Jacky, himself becomes a victim to introduced alcohol and dies when he rolls drunk into a campfire.

Thus, this parable, finding its place in the very fabric of our lives together, even to the walls of our church, forces us to consider how we might, in succession, play out robber, victim and Samaritan: betrayal, dependency and grace: the very fabric of our life with God.

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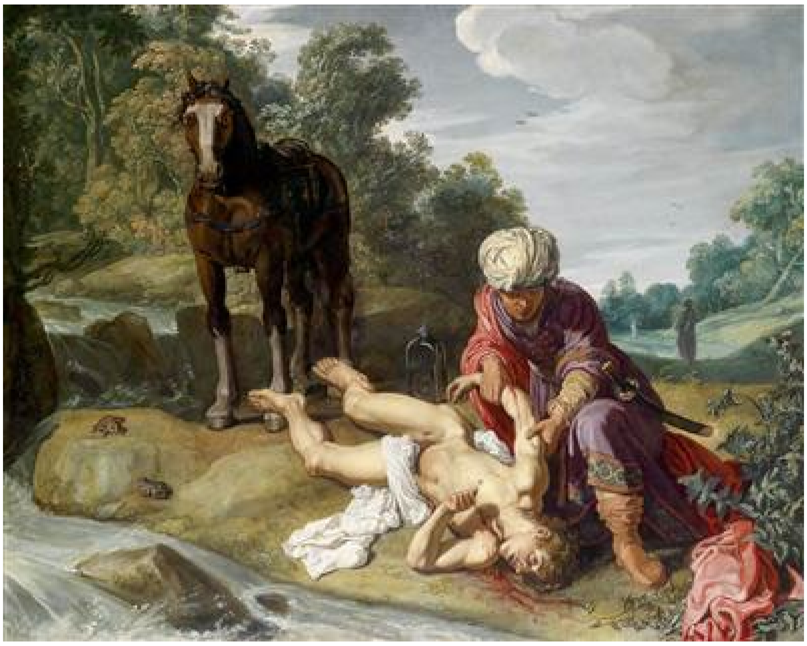
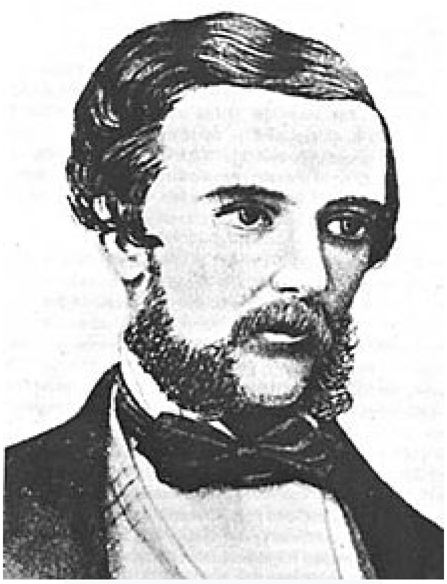
[7] Edmund Kennedy - Wikipedia; Biography - Edmund Besley Kennedy - Australian Dictionary of Biography (anu.edu.au)

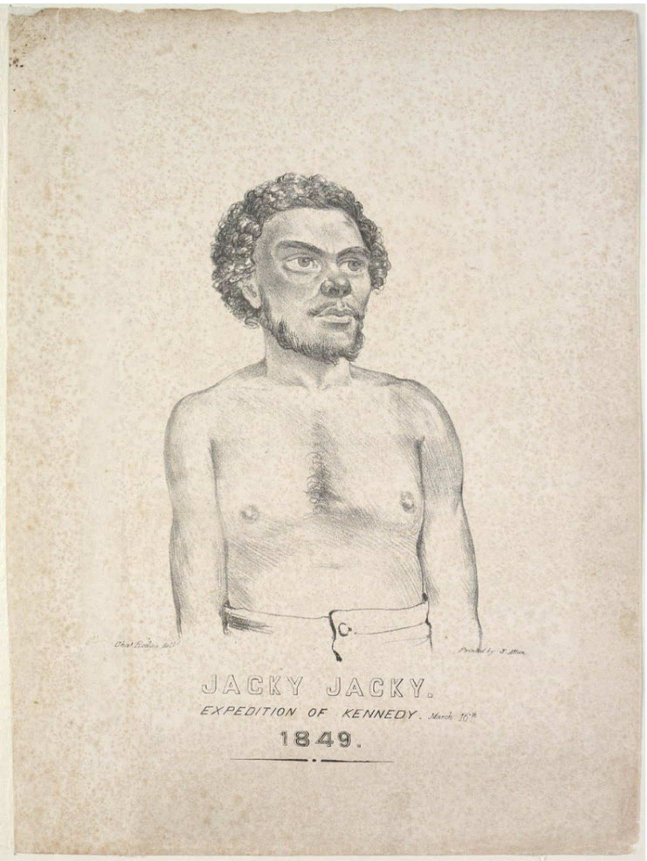
[8] Jackey Jackey - Wikipedia



The Good Samaritan
Pieter Lastman (1583-1633)
Palais Dorotheum, Vienna



Drawing of Edmund Kennedy,
originally published by T. L. Mitchell (1838)
Three Expeditions into the interior of eastern Australia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EXPEDITION OF KENNEDY. March 16th
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