

Sermon in a Nutshell

“Wally the Pratt” was a short sketch, based on Jesus’ most famous story, performed at a youth service at Christ Church Woodley on an overall theme of “Discrimination”. Jesus’ story has had many such modern versions, and puts a name to any unlikely person who does a good deed: a Good Samaritan.

The circumstances of Jesus telling the story are less well-known, but are equally important. A lawyer, an expert on law, on The Law as in the Old Testament, is asking Jesus, a wandering preacher having no particular credentials, some tricky theological question. Maybe a kind of test? Does he preach the party line? Is he kosher? Or maybe our lawyer is seriously searching for answers to the deepest of human questions, and senses that this man has insight into truths that are unclear to experts and indeed to most people.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” asks the lawyer. So, Jesus asks this Law expert what the Law says, and thankfully the lawyer doesn’t recite the whole lot, but reduces it to a few words, essentially “Love God and Love your neighbour”.** Jesus had elsewhere summarised the Law similarly, and probably so had other rabbis. The lawyer knew that Jesus couldn’t fail to agree with him.

“Do that and you’ll live!” said Jesus. Now remember that the lawyer had asked “What must I do to...” not “what must I believe” or “subscribe to”. “So do it!” is Jesus’ instruction. “Love God and Love Neighbour” might be taken as an attitude, or belief, or theory, but Jesus says ‘Do it!’

The message is clear that to love means active caring, and maybe the lawyer suspected that this would be Jesus’ answer. After all, people had been looking after their own kind for a long time. Pharisees looked after Pharisees; Essenes looked after other Essenes. Jews had no bad conscience about not loving Gentiles. But just to make sure, the lawyer asks “Well who is my neighbour?” And Jesus begins his famous story.***

The heart of the story is that a Samaritan (of all people) helps a guy who’s been mugged. Samaritans were distant cousins of the Jews, with slightly different beliefs, and the two races were on particularly bad terms. Samaritans were scorned by the Jews, yet the lawyer is forced to admit that the Samaritan has been neighbour to the mugged man, and has loved someone well outside his own kind.

The Jewish lawyer is silenced. “Go and do likewise!” said Jesus.

Wally the Pratt is likewise someone scorned by cool dudes, but is the only one who helps, and puts the rest to shame.

Jesus never really answers the question of “who is my neighbour?”, but turns it into “Who can I help, in spite of my prejudices?”

Mike Hill 12/3/07

** based on Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4, and Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18.

*** Luke chapter 10 verses 25 to 37