

St James July 10th 2022 The Golden Rule

Readings Deuteronomy 30: 8-14 Luke 10:25-37

Today's gospel is arguably the best known and important tract in the whole bible: its nub is the so-called Golden Rule of 'doing as we would be done-by'. Adherents of other religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, are expected to follow a similar same. I am going to suggest that we Christians are relatively weak when it comes to observing that rule and how we might improve our observance.

In her latest book 'Freeing Jesus', Diana Butler Bass traces her spiritual growth from childhood, of moving on from experiencing Jesus as a friend in kindergarten to a teacher as a teenager- and a very astute teenager at that. She had come to appreciate the need for rules to be observed for family and school life to run smoothly. She responded to encouragement given at home, day school and Sunday school in the form of 'Gold Stars' when she obeyed relevant rules. However, she noted that it was very hard to gain a star for 'Loving Your Neighbour as Yourself': it was such a difficult box to tick because it had no identifiable limits and an open-ended obligation.

Diana had also noted that her parents, like most, were very selective about observing rules, especially this Golden Rule, which featured prominently in Sunday worship but got forgotten the rest of the week.

In the passage from Deuteronomy, we find Moses promising the people of Israel a conditional 'Gold Star' in a package deal: provided they showed that they loved God, Father and Creator with all their heart and soul by following all the commandments that Moses had passed down to them, God would prosper the work of their hands and their offspring ('fruit of your womb'). It was a 'carrot and stick' contract: a 'gospel of plenty' to evangelical fundamentalists: obey the rules and God will reward you in this life. In v. 11-14 we find that obeying the rules should – should flow as naturally as living and breathing: inspiration stared them in the face.

The remarkable thing about those verses is that when you fast-forward 800-odd years, to Jesus' day, this was still the common understanding. When the young lawyer is asked what he thinks is needed to attain the 'Gold Star' of eternal life, he condenses Moses' commandments into the so-called Golden Rule 'love thy neighbor as thyself'.

This was not a new interpretation of the old rules by Jesus but a widely held understanding of the essence of the commandments passed down by Moses. However, the young lawyer sees the same problem that worried Diana Butler Bass: the open-ended commitment that was all too easily forgotten and he didn't want to miss out on the golden carrot, eternal life. He hoped for limits to be set but Jesus comes up with the parable of the Good Samaritan, that familiar tale of boundless compassion, spontaneous and limitless love, shown by someone from whom it was least expected, a Samaritan who did not share the religious views of the Jew. The lawyer was told to do 'go and do likewise': forget religion and instead be boundless in your compassion; love without limits.

The harmony between Moses and Jesus' teachings is astonishing. Moses could have told the story of the Good Samaritan and Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 30 v11-14 and their impact would be similar! So why did young Diana find adults making such a hash of 'going and doing likewise'; why does the church and why do we find it so hard to 'go and do likewise'?

The trouble lies with the linked rule that takes precedence: 'You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, soul, strength and mind'. While the intention is good and these are clearly 'both and' commandments, the neighbour is all too easily given the left-overs: what remains having fettered God; 'and your neighbour as yourself' can appear to be a bit of an afterthought, an 'add on' and optional extra.

The lawyer had quoted both rules to Jesus but Jesus came back with only one parable: he didn't have a parable about a 'Good Worshipper'. Is that because the two rules are really one and 'joined at the hip'? Isn't

Jesus inviting us to worship God with all our heart, soul strength and mind BY loving our neighbor as ourselves? or putting that another way 'to love our NEIGHBOUR with all our heart, soul strength and mind, and thus prove our love for God?

Isn't that what Jesus did? His love didn't stop flowing when he left the synagogue.

Let us 'Go and do likewise', expecting neither to be showered in goodies in this life nor guaranteed goodies when we die but to discover the thrill and joy of living for others each and every day, of building a new Jerusalem here on earth. As we sang in the chorus of our final hymn 'the name and the colour and the creed don't matter, WERE WE THERE!

Neville