

## Sermon at Oratory of Saint Francis Xavier del Caravita, Rome

for the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Eucharistic English-speaking community there.

18<sup>th</sup> October, 2015

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel has reverberated down through history for two thousand years and its vibrant message and life changing message continue to transform our consciousness and our lives to this day, always will. Why? Because here we have the true meaning of the golden rule, of all human interdependence and of the radical moral call that can save us from devouring ourselves or ignoring ourselves to the point of extinction. The story is a living drama the way it is told, with surprises, shocks and challenges that go to the heart of things.

The story opens with a narrative about a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The scene is laid... "from Jerusalem" ...the capital city, the home of the temple, the place where the religious identity and practise of the people is shaped and referenced, even under Roman occupation.

The man falls among thieves. The road is still partly hidden among the hills and has many isolated passages, where it would be easy for brigands to attack and steal and leave without a trace. But worst of all for this story, the man is not only attacked and robbed but is then stripped being left half dead. This means he cannot speak for himself or cry out, being half or fully unconscious.

This fact deepens the victim's predicament because people in that cross cultural complex time recognised each other at a distance by their clothing, and this victim has none, so crying out is his only hope of identification to a passerby, but he cannot. It might be conceivable that a roman soldier might go to the aid of another soldier if he saw a uniform, or a Pharisee to another Jewish cleric if the religious clothing made it clear. But this unknown nobody has nothing to identify him at a distance on the road. It seems that no one will take the risk of going up to someone in one man's land who is not clearly a member of their own race or caste. And, the robbers might still be around, why stop and risk being attacked, robbed and beaten yourself, for someone you don't know?

Then a priest comes along, down from the temple we assume, having performed his religious duties there perhaps, which is why he is coming down. We see his giving the victim a wide berth as a bad thing today, but at the time of the storyteller, this man was simply obeying the rules of his cate and his temple faith. By the rules of the temple, Priests were not allowed to venture near or touch what might be a dead person, and he had no way of knowing whether this man was dead or alive, being motionless and unspeaking by the side of the road. So the priest passes by on the other side. It implies he doesn't go near the man at all and walks away beyond the **ritually prescribed distance**. To breach **this distance** would require lengthy purification rituals and interfere with the priest's sacral function. The priest does the right thing by the religious system.

Then a levite, a lesser temple official comes by, and possibly because he may have seen the priest ahead, or for the same kind of reason, does the “right thing” and passes by on the other side. The temple system is being upheld and reinforced in this story, so far.

Then a Samaritan comes by, and when he comes to the places goes right up to the man; there is **no distance** between them. The Samaritan is of course an unexpected and shocking arrival on the scene, being a ritual and cultural enemy of the Jewish temple community and engaged in sporadic guerrilla warfare with the Jewish people. The enmity was deep even though they were distantly related originally, possibly deep because of that.

So what happens next seems incongruous and profoundly disconcerting to the Jewish audience listening to the story; the hated Samaritan has compassion on this unknown nobody, at risk to his own life possibly. The word for “had compassion” in the story has a deep rooted meaning, like the internal revolution a woman feels when she is giving birth. This feeling gives rise to an powerful empathy and a love from this Samaritan’s very core.

Then the Samaritan “pours on oil and wine” to the man’s wounds. This has been noted by scholars like Kenneth Bailey and others as introducing an echo of the rubric of the temple where the high priest, in the holy of holies performs his sacrifice to God on behalf of the people, as he pours on oil and wine to the animal who is sacrificed there on the most sacred altar.

The shocking and paradoxical suggestion is that this enemy of the people, by performing an act of courageous self- giving compassion to an unknown nobody of no known caste creed or race, is like a high priest offering to God the holiest sacrifice that is possible. Except here it is the road side gutter, in the the dust and the blood and the fear on a lonely dangerous road, miles from the temple sanctuary. An unknown Samaritan is being compared to the holiest member of the Jewish community, descended from a blood line and a royal priesthood, because he had a saving compassion to someone else he didn’t know, at risk to himself. **There is no distance between the ear of God and the groan of the poor. Anywhere, with anyone, at any time**

Then the Samaritan places the man on his own animal and takes him to a Jewish pub, an inn, where he asked that his charge be taken care of. This action has been compared by Bailey to the equivalent of an American Plains Indian bringing an unconscious badly wounded white man into Dodge City after the Battle of Little Big Horn. He is risking his life, he is walking a lonely isolated line where he himself could easily end up like the victim. And then the Samaritan even says he will come back and will pay the price for further costs to assist the man’s healing and recovery, his restoration.

Who would do this, really? No one. It goes against what is reasonable to expect, what is customary and what is normal. But this Samaritan does. And they recorded this story in Luke’s gospel because they later saw the storyteller himself walk this lonely road and make this same kind of self- giving sacrifice, for the whole world. As he had done when he walked in Palestine with countless people he didn’t know, offering the healing graces of God, bearing the burdens of others in himself and through his actions in public. **In Christ, there is no distance between our hearts and the God of the whole world, no distance at all.** This

way led the storyteller to the Cross and beyond, into the lives of everyone who is open hearted enough to believe that his Way is the only way for the world. It is truth, it is life.

We celebrate 15 years of this Eucharistic community here at Caravita tonight. Located just downstairs is the Jesuit refugees Services, Centro Astalli, where all the principles of the Good Samaritan are enacted quite literally. The Jesuits who trained at the old Collegio Romano next door were not allowed to study scholarly and theological matters unless they were integrated into this kind of solidarity and compassion on the street, in the name of Christ the High Priest, who is found in the gutters and waysides of the world where the poorest of the poor languish and sometimes die.

It is a Jesuit imagination that founded the Caravita Community we celebrate this evening, the Oratory of Saint Francis Xavier del Caravita, named after the Jesuit Pietro Gravita who was responsible for the construction of this space between 1618 and 1633. We think too of the Sodality movement serving here in lay formation and social outreach of women and men lay religious in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Today this sacred space and its hospitable community is honoured for its inclusive and contemporary outreach in liturgy to all who would come, where there is **no distance** between people and God, between each and the other, regardless of creed or race or caste, **no distance at all**. Here the immediate and intimate compassion and restorative justice of God are proclaimed, celebrated and shared each Sunday at 11:00a.m. This means that ecumenical and interfaith outreach is real here, without psychological barriers and without discrimination. We give thanks for 15 good years of this mission and pray every blessing on its ongoing life and witness. It is a covenant in the grace of God that is blessed, unique and life-giving.

Deo Gratias.