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## He took care of him

*Luke 10; 29-37*

The current economic and financial difficulties in our countries are giving rise to anxiety in the medical world. Is providing quality care in the face of economic constraints an empty promise by those managing our medical institutions? Might those very economic restrictions be an opportunity to prioritise other values in the medical world: to appreciate and value the personal exchange between carer and patient, to exist for and by another, to know that we can provide solace to the patient by our words and by our encounter with them...? The challenge is to know how to achieve our goals in the medical world without garnering regrets and falling into the trap of nostalgia, to stay 'close' to our patients, to continue to practise the most beautiful profession in the world, that of taking care of humanity. The current situation brings with it restrictions and constraints and obliges us to re-organize the way we provide care and the choices we make about how we practise medicine.

Faced with these questions, can the Bible help us to find again certain core values, to allow us to persevere and to return to basics? The gospel of Luke invites us to look and to hear how the Good Samaritan takes care of the wounded man. Let us look together at how this parable illustrates above all, how care comprises more than just technical competence.

### *The action*

Right from the start of the story, Jesus sets the scene : attacks happen on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. We can imagine that at that time, if anyone referred to that journey in conversation, it would make the hairs stand up on end of those listening. In fact, that route had a reputation for being very dangerous. The valley is deep; bandits regularly organize ambushes. So, as soon as Jesus starts talking about that area, his listeners can be in no doubt that something terrible is going to happen.

I think it is important that we give the events their rightful importance. They lend structure to the story and determine the lessons we can draw from the story. The title which is often given to this story 'The Good Samaritan' risks leading us into error. This is not a lecture...Jesus never passes judgement. He keeps a certain distance in his way of telling the story. Nonetheless this is about a wounded man hovering between life and death. But, in telling the story without emotion or pathos, Jesus wants above all to make us think, so that we can draw conclusions for ourselves about our way of life rather than bemoaning the plight of man. To that

end he offers two opposite reactions; those of the priest and the Levite and that of the Samaritan. And Jesus asks us but one question : 'Who is my neighbour?'

## *Who are the people involved ?*

They have no name. Their exact identity is not known; we have to find it out another way. This is, in fact, the main question of the story, the invisible red thread running through the narrative.

In this text, the central character is a man about whom nothing is known. We don't know anything about his race, his culture or his religion. He has no nationality, no role in society, no profession. 'The man was coming down from Jerusalem...' where he could have been to purify himself by visiting the temple. We know only that he is left behind in a critical condition; he is 'half dead'. A funny expression which could also mean that he is nevertheless 'half alive'! He is someone wounded by life. He is in the position of someone who is waiting for help; between life and death, he definitely can't get himself out of this fix alone. That could be you or me! Depending on what happens next he will either die or come back to life. This is the situation in particular of all those who have precarious health. In a certain manner, their life or their death lies in our hands according to our skills and our resources.

The priest is also coming down from Jerusalem. He is one of the priestly class. He is known primarily by his role in society (serving in the temple). He must remain pure (in particular he must not go near a dead person). The Levite behaves in exactly the same way. 'He saw him and passed by on the other side.' And so, neither stop to give help to the man who has been attacked and left for dead in the ditch. Should we condemn them? Not necessarily!

There may have been many reasons why these men did not stop; pre-occupied by their priestly duties, or maybe frightened by this stranger's injuries, or even indifferent to his plight. They see him, but prudently keep their distance. They only think of doing their work; they are officials (fonctionnaires) who can only operate (fonctionnent) within the remit of their position (fonction). And yet these two are men of religion: one might expect them to make some gesture! Perhaps we have already been disappointed by the behaviour of the main protagonists in this story?

For the Samaritan, it is completely different. He is passing by, on a journey. He is travelling alone, possibly whistling as he sits on his donkey. His nationality is known but it calls to mind another identity; that of the 'stranger', someone who is excluded from the Jewish community because of his religion. And yet, it is he who helps the wounded man. Should we therefore place a halo on his head? He is under no obligation other than that of love and he acts in the light of that. He will place the dying man onto his own animal. We might imagine that he is a merchant who has one donkey to carry his wares and rides on a second donkey. We are talking about a Samaritan.....this is no intellectual; he is no 'pillar of the synagogue'. He is one of those who have nothing to boast about; no church, few virtues. He is a pariah, barely tolerated in this land. He is not one of those who are 'spiritual'. He is who he is! A practical man, maybe a merchant! He sees the man abandoned on the edge of the road. He approaches. He saw him because he was on his guard; like all travellers of that period, he knew that at some point he would be attacked by robbers. He recognises himself in this man, lying wounded on the edge of the road. It could have been him. It may yet be him on his next journey. Then, he too would be grateful if someone stopped to help him, no more, no less. So it is said he 'was filled with compassion' (from the verb *com-pâtir* which means to suffer with).

The priest and the Levite would not be able to identify with this man 'stripped and beaten up'. At that time, it was not done to attack men of the temple to rob them and beat them up. And no doubt the Samaritan had the time to spare and also the strength of character to approach this man in trouble. He nurses him with what he has on him in his emergency bag; he disinfects with wine, he anoints with oil, he binds up his wounds, a natural and cheap treatment. He heaves him onto his mount to take him to the nearest inn where no doubt he also spends the night so that, like the wounded man, he can rest and regain his strength. The

following day, he 'takes out 2 pieces of silver', gives them to the inn-keeper and says to him, 'Take care of him.' This is what is prosaically called 'lending a hand'! He also tells the inn-keeper that he will return and pay any further supplementary costs...without worrying about how long it will take the Samaritan to recover. In those days, just as now, medicine did not come free! The Samaritan is well aware of the cost of treatment...and of accommodation. He undertakes to pay what is needed.

Nowadays, in order to save money, we try to reduce lengths of stay in hospital; we advocate day case procedures. The Good Samaritan is very aware of the time it takes for a wounded man to recover. He knows that it's important to give enough time for time, without necessarily knowing exactly the number of days, to allow the wounded man to recover enough to take to the road again; true wisdom in a man who knows human nature.

Nowadays, it is more and more difficult to give the sick time. Effectively, certain doctors no longer really listen to patients, because the duration of the consultation is so restricted. They have to increase the number of appointments and procedures in order to pay their taxes and to pay for the equipment they use.....time has its own cost, and, according to certain doctors, wasting time means wasting money. 'Time is money.'

And so, we have seen that the Samaritan 'saw him and was touched', he helped the wounded man. He will leave him in good hands and continue his journey. Maybe he has other business to attend to and does not want to be too delayed. No doubt, he is aware of the limits to what he can do to help and does not seek to do more than his aptitudes and skills allow him to. The Samaritan does not delude himself that he can do everything. He does not see himself as the Messiah! He knows that he can't do everything and accepts that. He will not try to do more and in so doing risk putting himself in danger. And in those days they didn't have to deal with medical insurance and civil liability!

What is more, he does not seek to make the wounded man dependent on him. He does not impose on him a debt that he will never be able to repay, of the type; 'I have saved your life; you owe me everything now.' He leaves the man free. He leaves him the space for 'gratitude' by allowing him in turn to give help to someone who, tomorrow, might have need of his help, in the same way that he has experienced it. In this way the roles played by the various people do not lead to dependence. Something of the order of a transfer can thus take place. This is not a dynamic of sacrifice and guilt but one of gratitude and recognition.

The good Samaritan 'lost' or 'gave' a bit of his time in stopping and putting this man on his own donkey; in other words he took care of him physically : he carries him, he mothers him.

He leaves ; but means to return... since he has promised to reimburse the inn-keeper for any extra expenses incurred before his return. Jesus does not specify whether the Good Samaritan says good-bye to the man he has saved. He looks after him without expectation of recompense.

He looked after him, he got involved with him... He takes upon himself the cost of his subsequent treatment... He involves himself totally with 'the man'.

... He pursues his own destiny, that of his private life.

... He leaves the wounded man to gain consciousness himself (wake up), free to resume his own personal journey.

## *All those involved*

The interesting thing about this story is to relate it to everyday categories of people: the wounded man represents the sick and the handicapped, the inn-keeper is the fore-runner of health professionals, and the Samaritan rather calls to mind the voluntary health sectors.

According to the French translations, the Samaritan is described as an unpaid volunteer 'bénévole' (doing it with good will 'de bonne volonté'), as benevolent 'bienveillant' (who wants to do good 'qui veut le bien') or merciful 'miséricordieux' (who has a heart attentive to misfortune 'qui a le coeur sensible au malheur'). The evangelist wanted, no doubt, to evoke ideas of consideration and care without cost, but also of free will and emotional intelligence! The Samaritan doesn't have to be a member of an organization such as the Red Cross or the 'Service Evangélique des Malades' (volunteers who visit the sick and the elderly at home). He is travelling. He didn't set out to visit a wounded man. He lets himself be deflected from his own goals. He even interrupts his journey to take notice of a person in distress on the side of the road. In other words, this example which he sets us should involve us all and should speak powerfully to us all.

### *The actions which are pivotal*

The decision to enter into an unexpected relationship with a stranger, the chance encounter, the turning aside from the chosen path all come together in this story. This Samaritan has a natural tendency to act which the others do not have. He alone stops and dares to approach. He then does what is needed to save the life of a man. 'He took pity on him'.

Nowadays, the story repeats itself with first-aid workers, those who seek to help the homeless by offering them food or a bed for the night, even medical aid. These interventions are financed by private giving and state grants to the organizations providing these services. In this time of crisis and state debt, these also fall victim to economic pressures in the same way as do other non-priority sectors....

### *Seeing and passing by on the other side*

The priest and the Levite see the wounded man but pass by, keeping their distance from him. What were their reasons for doing this ? Jesus doesn't say. He simply observes that they are men of religion. And yet can one be a 'religious observer' and make the choice not to take care of another person. What could motivate someone to 'see and pass by on the other side' ?

The anxiety of having a duty to accomplish...for them, a pre-arranged meeting in Jericho; for us, the excuse of lack of time ...of more *urgent* jobs than that of paying attention to a person in distress ! Fear ...the road is dangerous; robbers are not far away ! The instinct of self-preservation is the most powerful.

What part should we give to the risk of the encounter, to the possibility that one might have to question one's assumptions because of meeting this person ?

Martin Luther King, in his commentary on this passage in the Gospels, said 'I imagine that the priest and the Levite first of all asked themselves this question: what will happen to me if I stop to help this man ?'

### *To come alongside*

Christ chose to use as his example the Samaritan because he was a man without title, a stranger. He had nothing to lose, reputation wise, by associating with just any old person ! He does not consider the wounded man's qualities but only the fact that he is a human being just like him. He is set in motion by the dictates of his heart.

Martin Luther King turns the question of the priest and the Levite on its head. He asks himself: 'What will happen to this man if I don't stop?' Today, we would invoke the legal idea of failure to render assistance to a person in danger...

To care starts always with a breach in our serenity. It is the reverberation in us of other people's suffering. Paying attention to another demands of us an open-ness of heart and spirit. We need to see and hear: 'he saw him and took pity on him'.

To care means that we have to allow ourselves to go down a diversion and shorten the distance between us: 'he drew near to him'...The Samaritan puts himself in proximity to the victim of the robbers...illness leads to marginalisation; relationship brings life. It takes courage to get close to the older person who never receives visitors, to the uninteresting and difficult patient who creates a void around himself.

To care is to act, to fight to put man back on his feet. We say of an emergency doctor that he fights to save his patient.

## *Conclusion*

At the end of his parable, Jesus poses this question alone: 'Which person was neighbour to this man?' The legalist replies: 'It was the one who showed kindness towards him' — '... the one who showed mercy', say some translations.

Acts of care however competent may be accompanied by a relative indifference to people ...and turn out to be a failure in human terms !

Certain therapies require great technical skill, but that technical procedure is being done to a person, often in a state of fragility ! ...The way we give counts as much if not more than what we give, so the aphorism goes. Certain people like Augustine of Livois have developed the idea that the therapeutic act is an act of love.

In the parable which we have looked at together today, the kindness of the Samaritan is Jesus' basic premise.

It is the totally benevolent action which allows the other person to exist as a person of value in their own eyes so that they can create a future for themselves.

Finally, let us remember that famous hymn to love of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Co 13; 1-3):

**'If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong.....'**

**'If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.....'**

**'If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing....'**

Thanks for your attention