

**Churches Together in England**

# *Neighbours?*

A booklet for discussion groups



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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this booklet is to give church - and perhaps other – groups an opportunity to reflect on neighbourliness as a fundamental of our Christian faith.

We begin with a look at the way in which Jesus used parables to challenge conventional thinking in his audience. We take as our example the mysterious parable about the Samaritan in Luke's Gospel. Here, the neighbour is the totally unexpected (and unacceptable!) person from 'outside', who acts as God's rescuing hands. It would be helpful if all members of the group had read *A puzzling parable (p4)* before gathering for discussion.

With this as our background, we move on to group discussion sessions.

- The first session asks the group to reflect together on the parable itself.
- The second invites consideration of our own actions as neighbours in our own geographical area.
- The third takes us to our own church.
- The fourth considers our neighbourly relationships with other churches.
- The fifth asks us to think about our relations with people of other faith traditions.
- The sixth is an invitation to reflect together on the whole process.

Each session contains an introduction to help focus the group's thinking, and some questions to help you explore the subject together. It is not intended that you should try to answer all the questions: choose one to begin with and see where that takes you. It might also help with the process if your group leader or timekeeper draws the session to a close with a summary of the conclusions you have reached - you could be reminded of these at the beginning of the next session.

Chris Cook  
Chair of the Churches Spirituality Co-ordinating Group 2001-2004

## FOR REFERENCE: A puzzling parable

Most of us are familiar with the parables of Jesus - maybe they were our earliest introduction to Christian teaching, in school or church. We have come to think of them as simple illustrations of a deep truth. But if we look closer, we might see that parables are by no means simple. You have only to give a child a bare version of a parable for the first time and ask what it means, to find that such stories are puzzling and capable of more than one interpretation.

So perhaps when Jesus originally told them, the parables were very challenging, or even logically insoluble - an invitation to reflect on a puzzling and difficult world, via engagement with the story, and seek to break through to God's part in the mystery. The parable was meant to work upon our imaginations and effect in us the very unlikely transformation that Jesus' teaching was all about. The parables are a conduit for God's transforming power straight to our hearts and minds via the imagination. But the early Church provided each riddle with an explanation, so that their congregations could 'get it right'. These explanations are sometimes direct, as in the story of the Sower (Luke 8:5), or indirect, perhaps by the way it is presented in a particular context. The explanations remove the enigma and the complexity, but also our freedom to experience the meaning.

Thus it is with the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 29-37. You may find it helpful to read the parable now, perhaps in a modern translation.

What can possibly be enigmatic about this parable? Surely its meaning is not at all ambiguous?

Yet what happens to the story if we begin by removing the opening question 'who is my neighbour?' This may take an effort of imagination, since we might be so familiar with it. But what appears is a story with a quite different emphasis. We might suddenly see the Priest and the Levite doing what in their understanding they should be doing - avoiding contamination so that they can undertake their duties - the duties 'we' require them to do. And we see the Samaritan contaminating the Judaeon victim by touching him. So who is a neighbour here?

Some more details about the characters in the story might help.

**The Priest** is owner of a hereditary office. Hedged about by ritual laws which required the utmost purity for service in the Temple in Jerusalem. Highly respected (after all, right relationship with God depended largely on getting one's duty to the Temple right), closely meshed into the governance of Judea by Jews and Romans working together - so also viewed with suspicion by some Judaeans. Touching blood entailed impurity and a lengthy re-purification process. Since duty in the Temple was carried out by rota, to miss one's turn would mean a long wait for the next turn, and inconvenience to those who took one's place. Picking up a mugging victim was thus not a good idea.

**The Levite** is second only to the priests in importance in the Temple: responsible for the administration and back-up services. A hereditary office carrying kudos, plus profit from the retail aspects of the Temple (animals for sacrifice, for example). Also required ritual purity. Thus as unlikely as the Priest to pick up a wounded victim.

**The Victim** is assumed to be a local person, a Judaeans, citizen of a small remnant of the original Israel/Judah territory associated with the glory days of David and Solomon. Judaea was at the heart of the Roman administration of Palestine. Such a person would have regarded himself as a 'real' Jew as against Jews living abroad, intermarried Jews (as in Samaria), and outright infidels such as the Romans. We are told nothing about the victim except that he travelled alone on a road known to be bandit-infested, and that he was attacked and left for dead.

**The Samaritan** was one of the Jews who did not go into the Babylonian Exile in the 6th Century, but stayed behind in an area of land lying between Galilee and Judaea. They built themselves a temple to replace the one in Jerusalem destroyed by the Babylonians, and retained it even when the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt. They also intermarried with Babylonians, Assyrians and others - another case of ritual impurity. There was bitter feeling between Judaeans and Samaritans. 'Samaritan' was a term of abuse.

Samaritans were regarded with fear, hatred, and a sort of flesh-creeping disgust by Judaeans - 'dirty' would have been a word that sprang to mind. Priests and Levites on the other hand were held in respect, or a kind of humorous tolerance; but were also seen as potentially dangerous because of their regular contact in the Temple with a God too holy, powerful and dangerous for ordinary people to approach. We need only think of the story in 2 Samuel 6, in which Uzzah fell dead because he angered God by accidentally touching the Ark on its way into Jerusalem, to understand the fearsome aura which surrounded Priests and Levites.

**Luke's readers** would have been led by the context of the parable to believe it was a very clear answer to a question from a self-righteous lawyer about interpretation of the law's injunction to love one's neighbour (Leviticus 19:18). As we have seen, it is possible that Luke (and all the other Gospel writers) may have had a teacher's urge to make things simpler for people who might not otherwise understand.... So the lawyer's question removes the ambiguity of the parable, but also some of its mysterious power.

**And we ourselves** - how are we to understand the riddle Jesus presents us with?

To return to our starting point: Jesus' parables are virtually always about a mysterious subversion of the unexpected by a God who will go to any lengths to reach those who need him. This mysterious subversion, this reversal of the expected, not only conveys theology, but eventually bypasses it to work directly on our spirits, so that we are changed by the experience. We actually are changed by the parable, just as the rescued person in the story undergoes a real-world change from an ambiguous source, turning from victim into rescued.

We can help this process forward by transposing the parable in the most challenging ways we can find. Many of us reading this booklet, working on it together in whatever kind of group, are already priests or levites. We are committed, however lightly or tentatively, to furthering the work of God in our world. We might even regard ourselves as having been 'called' to this work, or set apart for it.

All of us have been victims of a robbery, left disabled and helpless, waiting in vain for rescue: robbed of health, of friends or relatives, of jobs. Worse, we will at some time in our lives have been robbed of joy, peace of mind, a sense of self-worth. Worse still, our faith may have deserted us. In these situations, it can seem that nobody understands our pain and fear, and nobody offers help. Everyone else seems so confident, not-afflicted, so not available.

All of us have been the hated Samaritan, unacceptable to others. Sometimes other people have felt like this about us - found us threatening or downright obnoxious, and we have felt unloved, invisible, simply wrong. We can't believe that God might love us, or that we are worth it.

## **SESSION 1: The Good Samaritan**

Your group might like to work through the questions below, to explore these difficult issues further. When you have done that, you may be ready to look about you, and return to the original question: 'Who is my neighbour?'

### ***Some questions and actions to consider:***

- Try to identify with each of the characters in the story in turn, asking what you learn from the experience of being the Priest, the Levite, the victim, the Samaritan ...
- What in your life could make you act like the Priest or the Levite in such a situation? Is there anything in your life as a Christian that allows you to think of some other people as 'untouchable' or beyond the pale?
- What in your life makes you feel like a victim - attacked, abandoned, lonely, in pain? What do you feel about people who do not understand, or help you? Is it resentment, and if so, how do you deal with it?
- Who is the helper, barely acceptable to you, leaving you feeling uncomfortable and indebted?
- Are you a helper? Are you able to help without hurting others' pride or misjudging the need?

### **Drawing the threads together**

You may be left feeling puzzled, challenged, indignant, asking where the old familiar story has gone. That was the point - to take away some one else's comfortable answers so that we can better see how mysterious and challenging the teaching of Jesus may be if we allow it to work upon us.

The story asks us to face for ourselves the question 'Who is my neighbour?' and to apply it to our own situations. The rest of this booklet suggests ways in which we might do this.



## **SESSION 2: Who is my next-door neighbour?**

Recently-discovered films made in the north of England in the 1900s, restored and screened on TV [Mitchell and Kenyon], showed streets and parks densely crowded with people at all times of day. Two world wars may have reduced those numbers. But the principal reason why our streets are crowded only in main shopping areas is that we now often have larger and more comfortable homes, smaller families, and unlimited home entertainment. It is even possible to do our shopping without leaving our front doors. Further, jobs and entertainments are very various and far-flung, so that we are unlikely to meet our local neighbours at work or play.

All this may be very good, and an improvement in some ways. But it also has the result that sometimes we do not know the 'neighbours' in our street, never mind our village, town or city. What are the implications of this for us as a faith community claiming to love our neighbour?

### ***Some questions and actions to consider:***

- How far along your street does knowing who your neighbours are extend?
- Are there neighbours within that area whom you don't know? Can you identify the reasons - and are these reasons comfortable for you?
- Are there neighbours who are unfriendly, unco-operative, or even hostile towards you? Do you feel the victim of misunderstanding or prejudice? Or could the hostility in some way be justified because of something you said or did?
- Are there people further afield in your village, town or city, who you regard as neighbours? What makes you feel neighbourly towards them?
- Could this situation be improved, perhaps by some very small steps?

### **SESSION 3: Who is my neighbour in my church?**

No matter how large or small the congregation in your church, there will be diverse needs, differences and gifts to be shared. This can be a real strength. In every human group there are priests, levites, victims and Samaritans; maybe even in each human being.

#### ***Some questions and actions to consider:***

- Each person in the group could try to write down their gifts and talents. Each might then choose one of each to share with the group.
- What are the needs in your congregation? What is being done to meet them?
- What are some of the differences among you? Are these a source of anxiety to you, or do you feel they could be strengths?
- How do you reach beyond all this in order to draw others into your fellowship?
- Are you as a congregation truly welcoming, and does the state of your building support this work?

## **SESSION 4: Who is my neighbour in another church?**

In 1936 a young woman married her fiancé in a Methodist chapel in a Derbyshire village. Although her best friend at work shared her joy in the planning, she was not able to attend the wedding service - for she was a Roman Catholic. Thirty-five years later, when the woman's son married his Roman Catholic bride, the Methodist minister shared in the wedding service in the Catholic church at the invitation of the priest.

Some of the barriers which have divided Christians all too often in the past, came down in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While many differences and particular denominational emphases remain, it is possible in England to attend a church service of another tradition, and find yourself singing familiar hymns, praying familiar prayers, hearing the same Bible passages read as you might hear that day in your own church. You might well encounter similarities in liturgy – for example in the Eucharist, Holy Communion, or Lord's Supper, or at a baptism, wedding, or funeral.

But not everything has changed; and the remaining differences can be a source of friction or mistrust between us.

We need constantly to be reviewing what is 'real' for us in our own denomination's beliefs and practices, so that we know where we stand. Then we can move more confidently into exchange with other Christians, seeking to understand their beliefs and practices, equally sincerely held. From there we may learn to live with the differences more tolerantly, for the sake of that unity to which Jesus called us.

### ***Some questions and actions to consider:***

- How did each of you come to belong to your particular congregation? If you came from another denomination, does that hold you back from working with them?
- Could your group draw up a brief statement of faith?

- Do you welcome other Christians to your worship? How do you make them feel at home with you – explain what will happen during the service – make an opportunity for friendly questions and discussion afterwards?
- Could you arrange as a group to attend worship in another local church, then reflect together on the experience afterwards, ideally with a member of that congregation to help with anything you felt uncertain about?
- Were there any differences or explanations left unresolved for you? What can you do to live lovingly or even creatively with those differences? Perhaps Christianity does not promise a smooth, bland passage through life, nor does it encourage us to brush uncomfortable disagreements under the carpet. More probably it calls us to live a faith-adventure, challenging us to seek the unique, and maybe strange, part of the truth about God, given to each individual.

## **SESSION 5: Who is my neighbour in another faith tradition?**

People of many different faith communities live in England, and religious buildings of different traditions are a familiar sight in many towns and cities. Christians are the largest group; the eight other historic faith traditions are Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Zoroastrian.

Sometimes we get to know people of other faiths through individual friendships, because they are neighbours, colleagues or friends. Where this is the case, we can learn more about each other's festivals, celebrations, and beliefs, in a friendly and informal way.

But this is not an opportunity available to all of us, and so we need actively to seek ways of understanding our neighbours whose faith is different from ours. Many of us would like to do this, but do not know where to begin.

In some parts of the country there are local inter-faith initiatives, where the process of understanding can begin, and good relations can be built up. These are rooted in relationships based on respect, which acknowledge the distinctiveness of different religious traditions, and do not blur the differences.

Large-scale disasters in different parts of the world may bring us together in ways we could not have imagined, giving us opportunities to work together: we have a responsibility to build on the relationships begun in compassion.

In the parable, the Samaritan himself was a foreigner from a tradition regarded with both ignorance and hostility.

Christian Churches often play an important role in inter-faith work, with some denominations having their own specialist staff. Churches work together through the Churches Commission for Inter Faith Relations to encourage people to be involved in the ongoing commitment to the challenges and opportunity that religious diversity brings.

***Some questions and actions to consider:***

- If there are people in your group who have experience of personal contact with neighbours of other faiths, perhaps they could share the experience.
- Do the schoolchildren in your family and/or church learn about other faiths at school? Could you learn from them?
- Are there local social projects which involve people of different faiths, in which you are involved?
- How would you show 'respect' to people of another faith community, and how would you build it within yourselves?
- How might you share your faith-based customs – such as those associated with Christmas and Easter - with others, and learn to share theirs?
- How could you make opportunities for sharing the important aspects of your faith with people from another faith tradition, and invite them to share theirs with you.

## **Session 6: In conclusion**

It might be a good idea to hold a sixth session reviewing the whole experience of the group over the time you have spent together. It is sometimes helpful to look at the positives and the negatives, and write them down. That can help the process of deciding what to leave behind, and what needs more thought and work.

The group might like to write a declaration of intent – and then check with one another from time to time that the intentions are being put into action. Who is my neighbour? Would I cross the road for him/her? If he or she crossed the road for me, would I accept that compassion or practical help? How can I develop that inward respect from strangers which draws on the amazing respect of God for me?

*Neighbours?* is a challenging booklet for group discussion. The parable of the Good Samaritan is the starting point for an exploration of neighbours in a variety of contents – the community, in churches and in the wider faith community.

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