

“AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?”
(LUKE 10.29)

It is indeed a great honour and joy and privilege to be here with you this morning, and particular thanks to your Treasurer, John Uff. We've been friends and colleagues at King's now for a couple of decades, working closely together with him and Diana in the King's College Alumni Association, and, indeed, we were also neighbours in Highgate.

I'm grateful for all the information I was sent about the Mulligan Sermon, not least the amazing list of previous preachers. I see previous Deans of King's: Ulrich Simon in 1969, Sidney Evans in 1979, and Richard Harries in 1983, and then again when we made him Honorary Professor of Theology in 2008. Apart from Deans of King's, other Professors from King's appear a bit like the Number 93 Bus: you had Gordon Dunstan in 1964 and Christopher Evans in 1965, but you had to wait another forty years before Alister McGrath came along in 2005! There are, of course, many Bishops and Archbishops on the list as well. Most recently, I see you had the Archbishop of York a few years ago. Now I don't know if he began his sermon when he was preaching here with the same story he told in York Minster to the General Synod last July, when he preached on this gospel passage – and do bear in mind that he is a barrister by training – he began by asking the question, “Why are lawyers like the rhinoceros?” To which the answer was, of course, “They're short-sighted, thick-skinned, and always ready to charge”. Only a barrister could tell that joke. . . .

I'm sure that was not true, of course, of James Mulligan – a barrister, bencher, QC and judge, who held many posts including that of Treasurer here in 1896. He gives us the direction that this sermon should concentrate on “the interview between Our Lord and the Lawyer, as recorded in the twenty-second chapter of the First Gospel, and at greater length in the tenth chapter of the Third Gospel”. So, you have the same topic and reading every year, and after such an extraordinary list of previous preachers, I find myself asking, “What can I possibly bring, that you won't have already heard before from my distinguished predecessors?” Well, looking at the list, I thought of two things: I'm a golfer, and I'm a biblical scholar. Now those of you who may be golfers will know that in golf a Mulligan also features, particularly in friendly play, and especially on the first tee. If nerves get the better of you and you top your drive into the woods or into the water, you can be granted “a Mulligan”, which means that you do not have to pay the normal penalty of an extra stroke and being three off the tee. You can start all over again; the Mulligan ignores your transgression, and lets you have another hit. We shall return to that later.

There may be other golfers on your list or preachers, but you do have to go back to 1965 before you had Christopher Evans as the last recognised biblical scholar. Now, as well as

being Dean of King's College, I'm also the Professor of Biblical Literature and I am giving my Inaugural lecture later this week; I've been particularly busy this year in the celebrations of the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible. Therefore I thought perhaps we should look at the biblical text, because Mulligan's instructions to Matthew 22 and Luke 10 invite a detailed treatment of the text. Of course, as lawyers you're well used to detailed cross-examination of the witnesses – and there is in fact a *third* witness that Mulligan's instructions don't include: the oldest and most original witness, Mark's gospel.

THE FIRST WITNESS: Mark 12.28-34

So, if we can call our first witness, it is Saint Mark in the twelfth chapter of his gospel. Mark and Matthew both set the story in the last week of Jesus' life, in Holy Week, between Palm Sunday and his arrest and crucifixion. They also agree on the location; it's in the Temple courts: the porticoes, that nice shaded area which is a setting for rabbis and teachers to discuss the finer points of the meaning of the Law – what I'm sure goes on all day here in The Walks – sitting in the shade, and discussing how we should interpret the law. They've been debating Jesus' authority as a teacher, whether it's right to pay taxes to Caesar or not, and – this one particularly, I think, must occupy your minds at Gray's Inn regularly – whose wife the woman who has married seven brothers would be when you get to heaven. At which point, one of the scribes, who Mark says has heard that Jesus has been answering well (Mark. 12.28), decides he'll come and have a bowl, and produces a bit of a bouncer, or a googly. "Which," he asks, "is the greatest commandment?" It's not a trap, just simply an honest enquiry addressed to this young Rabbi from "oop north" to try to find out what he thinks.

As I'm sure you're aware, there are over six hundred commands in the Torah: three hundred and sixty five "Thou shalt not's" (one for every day of the year), and over two hundred and fifty positive commands. Now the Chief Rabbi, who's also a Visiting Professor at King's, is fond of saying, "Where there are two Rabbis, there are three opinions." I'm sure that's true of QCs as well. So, ask somebody which is the greatest commandment out of over six hundred, and you can tie them up in knots for weeks. The story is told of a gentile who went to Rabbi Shammai, the leader of the conservative faction, and said "You've got all these commands; please could you sum up the Law for me, in the time you can manage while standing on one leg?" Rabbi Shammai was rather outraged by this, gave him a clip around the ear, and sent him packing. So he then went to Rabbi Hillel who was the leader of the more liberal faction. Hillel duly lifted one foot off the ground, and said, "Do not do to your neighbour what you don't want your neighbour to do to you. That is the sum of the Law; the rest is commentary, but go and learn it anyway." (*b. Shabbat* 31a, in the Babylonian Talmud)

And so, in this story where somebody stands up to ask Jesus the question, it fits very much into that tradition of rabbinic interpretation of the Law. Jesus' reply brings together the great *Shema*, the "Hear, O Israel" from Deuteronomy 6.5, which we had read just now as our first lesson, and the command from the middle of the holiness code in

Leviticus chapter 19.18: the love of God, and the love of neighbour(Mark 12.29-31). As far as we can tell, this is the earliest bringing together of those two commands, but clearly they reflect the two tablets of the Decalogue, the love of God and the love of neighbour.

In our first witness, however, Mark then goes on to give us an interesting response, because the Lawyer commends Jesus' reply, and says that the love of God and the love of neighbour are more important than the whole sacrificial system in the Temple (Mark 12.33). Now this is *not* recorded in either of our other witnesses, which is rare, because Matthew and Luke normally include all that Mark has. But Jesus' reply is also unique to our first witness. Jesus looks at the Lawyer and says: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God". At which point, "nobody dared to ask him any more questions" (Mark 12.34).

THE SECOND WITNESS: Matthew 22.34-40

Let's now call our second witness, Saint Matthew, the twenty second chapter. Saint Matthew will tell us that it's in the same setting and location in space and time, as Mark. It is in the porticoes of the Temple during Holy Week. Matthew particularly picks up the previous controversy – the much-married wife, and whose she will be in the resurrection, asked by the Sadducees who didn't believe in the resurrection. Jesus confounds the Sadducees with his response; so Matthew therefore identifies the Lawyer more closely, as one of the Pharisees: one of their lawyers, one of their scribes, using the word *nomikos* for lawyer, occurring in the Gospels only here and in Luke.

Now the Pharisees accepted the Law of Moses as Scripture (as did the Sadducees), but in addition they recognized the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Prophets, the Writings, and so on. They believed in the resurrection, and they were particularly keen on trying to work out how to apply all the finer points of the Law in daily life. So Matthew says that the Lawyer stands up to "test Jesus", or – as we heard in the King James Version just now, to "tempt" him (Matt. 22.35). It is the same word as used of the devil tempting Jesus in the desert (Matt. 4.1-11).

But we still get the same question in our second witness – "Which is the greatest commandment?" – and the same answer – "The love of God and the love of neighbour". However, interestingly Matthew then omits Mark's exchange about this being more important than the Temple's sacrificial system, and Jesus' commendation that the Lawyer is not far from the Kingdom of God, and instead we have a comment unique to Matthew: that "on these two commandments hang", or depend, "all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22.40). In other words, as the Pharisees accept the Law of Moses, but also the Prophets and the rest of the Old Testament, this is the crucial, hermeneutical principle: all commandments are to be interpreted according to this love commandment, to love God and love your neighbour. Now for lawyers, of course, this is crucial: if we can have an over-arching principle through which all the Law should be interpreted, that will guide the meaning of individual texts or laws.

THE THIRD WITNESS: Luke 10.25-37

Next we come to our third witness, St Luke, who is the longest. Notice how Luke has a completely different setting for the story; it's in a different space and different time. It's not in Jesus' last week, nor is it in Jerusalem. Luke constructs his gospel in three large sections: the ministry in Galilee (chapters four to nine) and the last week in Jerusalem (from chapter nineteen to the end). But in between there are ten chapters in which Jesus is travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem; he "sets his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9.51). If you are familiar with the geography of the Holy Land, you'll know that the direct route from Galilee to Jerusalem takes you through what we know today as the West Bank (or at least, it would, if it wasn't for the Wall of Separation between the Palestinians and the Israeli settlements). It was almost as difficult in the ancient world, because the West Bank then was Samaria, and, when the Samaritans realised that Jesus was on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Luke says that they would not let him through (Luke 9. 53). So he had to take the long way round, all down the Jordan valley. Some of his more hot-headed disciples, James and John, came up with a way to respond to the Samaritans who wouldn't let them through, by suggesting to Jesus that they called fire from heaven down on the Samaritan villages (Luke 9. 54). They still had a little bit to learn about the greatest commandment, clearly!

The Samaritans were the descendants of those Jews who had not gone into exile five hundred years previously. It's a bit like those villages in Norfolk which don't talk to one another today, because the other lot didn't warn them about the Vikings, you know the kind of thing. The Samaritans were therefore seen by the Jews as, at best, "half-bloods" or heretics. So Jesus goes the long way round down the Jordan valley to Jericho, and then up the steep road from Jericho to Jerusalem. Along the way, he stops and stays with various Pharisees and Rabbis, and takes part in various debates and disputes about the meaning of the Law, and how to interpret it. And so, the timing for this particular discussion is in the months or the weeks before Jesus gets to Jerusalem, and quite possibly on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. For the context is just simply this: that the Lawyer stands up and asks him a question (Luke 10.25); in other words, they are sitting around chatting like you do in your shady idyll in The Walks, and he stands up to ask Jesus the question. Once again, it is to "tempt" him, but it is an even stronger word in the Greek, *ekpeirazon*, "to make trial" of him. But here in Luke, the question is a different one: not, "Which is the greatest commandment?" but, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What" is a legal term; actions are important: "What are the actions I must do to get eternal life?" Jesus is asked the same question later, by the rich young ruler (Luke 18.18). The translation here, "life eternal" is the more correct translation; in the King James Version it is translated as "life everlasting" but F D Maurice was sacked by King's College in 1853 for (correctly) translating it as "eternal" rather than "everlasting", so I better not go there today!

Jesus, of course, is a good teacher, and so he refers the Lawyer back to the Law: the *nomikos* is told to go to the *nomos*. "What is written in the Law?" says Jesus; "how do you read it?" (Luke 10.26). It's a classic question from the teacher: "How do you interpret it?" In other words, make the student answer the question himself. So in Luke,

it is the Lawyer who puts the two commandments together, in his reply, “The love of God and the love of neighbour”. And Jesus gives him a gold star: “You’ve answered correctly”, he says, “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10.27-28). “What must I do to get life?” “Well you know, it’s in the Law, do it and you will live.” When I was doing some research for this sermon, I came across a commentary written by Johann Albrecht Bengel in 1742, who commented about the Lawyer’s question: *qui multa interrogant, non multa facere gestunt*; those who ask lots of questions don’t necessarily get very much done!

It’s not enough, of course, for any lawyer simply to be told that. It’s still far too vague and undefined. It’s not in contractual law; it’s not crystal clear or tied down enough. So he has to come back with a supplementary question, wanting to justify himself to get it clear, to bring himself to justice: “Could you please be a bit more specific? Who, exactly, is my neighbour?” (Luke 10.29). Remember that Rabbi Hillel defined the Law as, “Don’t do to your neighbour what you don’t want your neighbour to do to yourself”, and in Leviticus chapter nineteen where we’re told to love your neighbour, “neighbour” is quite specifically defined: “fellow Israelite” (Leviticus 19.16).

There is, however, an exception clause in verse thirty three that says, “For the purposes of this, resident aliens also count as neighbours” (Lev. 19.33). But in contemporary debate, in Jesus’ own time, certainly neighbours did *not* include Samaritans, Gentiles, or Romans. The great Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, Maimonides, said that killing a Gentile was acceptable, because they weren’t a neighbour, as defined in Leviticus 19. So Jesus answers the Lawyer’s question with a story, a case study, a scenario. (When I was an undergraduate at Oxford, I shared a set of rooms with a law student, and I used to be amazed by the fantastic, imaginary situations that would be concocted to illustrate a point of law.) Often, it was the typical story of three people, you know the kind of thing – an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman in effect. In those days, they would have expected a Priest, a Levite, and a layman, and it probably would have had an anti-clericalist twist.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is eighteen miles long, and there is a drop of over three thousand and three hundred feet: Jerusalem was two and a half thousand feet above sea level, Jericho seven hundred and seventy feet below. It winds and twists through the wadis, through the rocks, and it is notoriously dangerous even today. I walked it in the mid 1980s, but with armed guards. The man falls among thieves, is stripped, beaten, and left half dead, and then we have our three passers-by. The Priest comes by, and Luke, our third witness, tells us that he’s going *down* from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10.30); in other words, he has done his duty as a Priest and he is on his way home. If he was going *up* to Jerusalem, there might have been an excuse – not to get ritually defiled – because he would have to keep himself pure; but there is no excuse, because he is going home. However, he still puts the interpretation of the Law before the man’s need; he sees him, and walks by on the other side (Luke 10.31).

Then along comes a Levite, one of a caste of assistants to the Priests in the Temple; there are about ten thousand of them at the time. And he does the same: has a look, and walks by (Luke 10.32).

Now Jesus' hearers would have been expecting the third person to be a Jewish lay person, after the exposure of the Priest and the Levite. A detested Samaritan would have been the last person to be expected; remember how James and John wanted to call down fire on their villages? (Luke 9.54). We are not told whether he's going up or down, he's just on a journey; however, when he sees the man, he is moved to pity. The Greek word here, *esplachnisthe*, literally means he has "a bowel movement"; he feels it deep in his guts. He crosses over the road, and binds up the man's *traumata*, his trauma, his wounds. He pours oil on the wounds, which would soften them, and wine, which would act as an anti-septic – maybe Luke was a doctor after all. The Samaritan puts the man on his own beast and takes him to an inn, to the nearest roadside Travel-lodge if you like, where he takes care of him overnight. The next day he has to go about his business, so he gives the innkeeper what, in the King James Translation, is described as "two pence". It's actually two *denarii*: a *denarius* was a day's pay – not necessarily lawyers' rates, I admit – but the day's pay of a worker. The Samaritan tells the innkeeper to take care of the man, and he'll pay any more when he returns (Luke 10.33-35).

So we have the shock of a Samaritan, rather than a layman, as our third person in the story. But now, Luke, our third witness, gives us the twist. The Lawyer's question was clear; "Please define 'neighbour' for me"; it is what judges have to consider, I gather, in the law of negligence. He is wanting to define that, in a context of recognising that people like Samaritans were not neighbours. However, Jesus turns the question the other way around: not, "Who is my neighbour" but, "Who *acted* as a neighbour to the wounded man?" The issue is not, "Did the wounded man count, was he defined as 'neighbour'?" – which quite clearly he was from the point of view of the Priest and Levite, a fellow Israelite according to Leviticus 19. Instead, it is "Who acted as neighbour to him?" And the Lawyer cannot even bring himself to say the detested word "Samaritan"; so he says, "The one who *did* [and there's that legal word again], the one who *did* mercy to him." In reply, Jesus says simply, "Well, go and *do* likewise" (Luke 10.36-37). The Lawyer asked for a definition of what he had to do to get eternal life, and was quizzed on his reading of the Law, and came up with the two commandments. He was told, "Do this and you will live." But his request for further clarification and definition has been opened up wide – that the real neighbour is one who does mercy to others, and we are to do likewise.

CONCLUSION

So, we have heard our three witnesses and it's time to have the summing up. Well, the three witnesses agree that the debate is about the interpretation of the Law. They disagree about the details of who or where or when or how the question was asked. But they agree that the answer of the double command of love of God and love of neighbour is at the heart of the Law. They also agree that it is not a nice, theoretical debate: on our reaction, everything depends. In Mark, the Lawyer is told, "You're not far from the Kingdom of Heaven". In Matthew, we're told that on these two commands hang everything, the Law, the sacred scriptures, everything. In Luke, it is about what you must *do* to enter into eternal life: how we treat others and act towards them.

So, if I go back to the Archbishop of York's story – was the Lawyer “short-sighted, thick-skinned, and ready to charge” Jesus? Well he was certainly testing him out with a charge to see how he would react. He was thick-skinned enough to ask for further clarification when he already should have realised he was up against a master interpreter of the Law. But he was not so short-sighted as not to realise that his eternal destiny depended upon his response, which is why he asked Jesus: “What must I do to get eternal life?” In golf, the Mulligan (and there's great debate as to which Mulligan it's named after) is the chance *not* to take the penalty due to my mistake, but have another go, a free hit, sheer grace. Maybe James Mulligan QC, in requiring us to face the Lawyer's question to Our Lord, is giving us all “a Mulligan”, the chance not to pay the penalty for the way we treat our fellows, our neighbours, other human beings, but to have another go, to get it right this time: to do mercy, and so, to enter into eternal life. Amen.

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