

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist

Trinity 4

Sunday 10 July 2022

10.00am

[Amos 7.7-17]

[Colossians 1.1-14]

St Luke 10.25-37

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”  
It’s a natural enough question. I dare say most of us have thought about it at some time or other, even if we haven’t plucked up the courage to ask the vicar in public. But I wonder if it’s a question that the Good Samaritan was thinking about as he rode away from the inn after caring for and providing for the injured traveller?

Here he was, an outsider in foreign territory. He’d been on a business trip to Jerusalem, and I

dare say that although he might have been treated with studied politeness (after all, merchants can't afford to alienate their business associates) the underlying hostility to Samaritans won't have escaped him. He wouldn't have been allowed in the temple for instance (even though Samaritans did then and do now worship the same God). He'd have had to eat apart in the inns he visited. And who knows what other petty acts of discrimination he might have suffered, and still would as he travelled on to Jericho?

The name Patrick Hutchinson probably doesn't mean very much to you, though if I showed you [the famous photograph](#) of him carrying a white right wing demonstrator to safety you'd probably remember. Patrick is a Black man who was taking part in a Black Lives Matter demonstration at the South Bank Centre in London two years ago. They were confronted by an aggressive counter-demonstration. The situation was getting very nasty. Patrick and his friends noticed an altercation beginning at the top of a stairwell. One of the counter-demonstrators, now known to be a retired British Transport Police Officer and more than a little inebriated, was in danger.

It looked like one of the protesters was trying to stub a lighted cigarette out on the man's head; another may have slapped him. Patrick and his friends first formed a protective barrier around the counter-demonstrator, then Patrick picked him up in the fireman's lift and carried him to the police lines and to safety. It's the photo of him doing this that you probably remember. It was on TV and went viral on social media in hours.

I don't suppose the whole incident lasted more than a minute or two. Nor do I think Patrick had time to give a thought to the modern equivalent of 'inheriting eternal life' any more than the Samaritan did on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. "It was instantaneous" he said later. "I was thinking ... of what could happen to him, but I was also thinking of the Black Lives Matter movement being derailed by something like this tarnishing its name... [Young BLM activists] would have been vilified [if they'd hurt him.]" Patrick and his friends acted in the way they did because that's the sort of people they are. So did the Samaritan. When he saw the injured traveller, he might well have thought "that could have been, could be, me."

One of the biggest misapprehensions people have about organised religion is that we are meant to be better than other people. They (and very often we) think religion is all about following a set of rules, commandments. This was the lawyer's thinking when he put his question to Jesus. 'If only I can follow the right rules, I'll be alright'.

But who of us can keep all the commandments? I don't. St Paul puts it well in Romans (7<sup>18-19</sup>): *For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

There's another serious problem, one that I think is insuperable. Can we ever do enough? There's always one extra good deed left to do after we've done the last one. And if we think we are doing enough, well, listen to what C S Lewis once wrote. He's describing the members of a church congregation to his readers. I've not been able to track down the exact quote but it goes something like this. "Here is Mrs So-and-so, who goes round doing good unto everyone. You can

tell who everyone is by the haunted look on their faces.”

One of the reasons Patrick Hutchinson and his friends went to the Black Lives Matter demonstration was that they knew how easily such demonstrations can get out of hand. They went there not just to demonstrate but also to keep an eye on their fellow demonstrators. In other words, Patrick was under no illusions about human nature: his own, or that of his friends.

In Jesus’ parable, the Samaritan thought he was neither better nor worse than anyone else. He thought about the injured traveller the same way. “He could have been me.” One of the first things we do together in the service this morning was to confess our sins. As the Roman centurion once said to Jesus “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.”

What we are asking is for God to look down on us just as we are, warts and all. Once all our defences are stripped away, our hypocrisy and self-justification and all the other excuses we

makes for ourselves, it's then that God's miracle happens.

Yes, he looks down on us just as we are. But he looks down on us in love. Then the miracle happens. We change. We find ourselves doing the right thing, without thinking about it, almost without being aware of it.

Patrick Hutchinson describes his experience as an odd one, but not a bad one. "It felt really good" he said later. After his photo had gone viral he says "I was receiving messages from around the world, saying it gave them hope." He even got messages from people on the far right, saying his actions had made them think about their own beliefs.

I don't know whether the Good Samaritan felt a similar warm glow as he rode away from the inn and resumed his journey to Jericho. I rather hope he did. Nor am I entirely certain if this is what the lawyer meant when he used the phrase 'inherit eternal life'. But I'm pretty certain it's what Jesus meant, and if I'm right, it'll do for me.