

## The Good Samaritan: Jesus Explains the Incarnation

Fr. Paul Check

*I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. In pastoral ministry we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

I wish to thank Bishop Olmsted for the opportunity to join you for the annual white Mass here in the Diocese of Phoenix. I was especially grateful for this invitation because your Bishop serves as a member of the episcopal board of Courage, an apostolate of the Catholic Church to those who experience same-sex attractions and to their families. Bishop Olmsted's counsel and encouragement have been blessings to me in my role as the director of the apostolate, and so I am very happy to try and be of some service to him. I will offer some remarks about the work of our apostolate and how the Church approaches the question of homosexuality after dinner this evening.

You may recognize the words I quoted a moment ago as those of our Holy Father, Pope Francis. His emphasis on *healing wounds* must resonate in a special way with a group of people who dedicate their professional lives to alleviating suffering and restoring health.

In the same interview I cited, the Pope also referred to the Good Samaritan, "who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor." St Luke, whom we honor today, is the only evangelist who gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan...indeed in the same chapter from which we have just heard (10:29-37). After the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan is probably the best known and most loved of all of Our Lord's parables. It is an idiom that anyone can recognize: the kindhearted person who helps a stranger in need. This is the section of the Gospel upon which I would like to reflect.

We tend to see the parable of the Good Samaritan as a moral fable, i.e., a striking and memorable answer to the question, "And who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29) But more than simply a moral tale—as significant as that is—the parable of the Good Samaritan is first a doctrinal story, *a re-telling of the Incarnation*, of how "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14), and why He chose to do so.

Is it not the case that the moral teaching of Jesus *gains strength* from the fact that He *lives* what He *proposes* to us? For example, Blessed Pope John Paul II called the Beatitudes a "self-portrait of Christ," (Veritatis Splendor 16), and as such, they become all the more attractive to us because Jesus lived spiritual poverty; He was a "man of sorrows" (Is 53:3; cf. Mt 5:4); He was meek, just, merciful, pure of heart; He was a peacemaker and was persecuted for the sake of the truth.

What can we learn then, from this well-known parable, about how God chose to heal our wounds and in so doing, how He warmed our hearts? You recall from the story that a man has fallen by the side of road, having been beaten and robbed. The Fathers of the Church tell us that the fallen man is *fallen man*, meaning, he represents our wounded nature, the consequence of the rebellion of our first parents. Neither the figure in the parable nor humanity more generally can rescue itself from this tragedy. Man

cannot make his way to a physician. Grace must come to us.

A priest and Levite pass by without offering assistance. They can be taken as figures of the Law and the Prophets of the Old Covenant. What they represent is important to salvation history, but of themselves, they cannot heal. Who stops to offer aid? A Samaritan, who is not only a stranger but also an *enemy* of the man in the trench, whom you may remember has come from Jerusalem, and is therefore understood to be a Jew. This is quite remarkable. Had the man in the parable been conscious, he might have even refused help from someone he would have despised. And what do these things mean? The very God man offended by saying—in effect—“You are not my Father anymore,”—that same God has forgiven the insult and insolence, and shown the offender great kindness.

“In this is love,” writes St John, “not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins.” (1 Jn 4:10) And as St Paul said, “But God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8) We could almost stop there, and pray that our own hearts would be softened, but there remain some vital points that will enrich our understanding.

The Samaritan was on a journey. God comes into His own creation as a pilgrim, and indeed, as a stranger, for whom there was “no room at the inn” (Lk 2:7)...the saddest line in the Gospel according to Archbishop Fulton Sheen. But even knowing this would be true, God did not send an angel or any other ambassador...He chose to leave the glory and safety of heaven and to put Himself in harm’s way...why? To become our *neighbor* by sharing our nature and our circumstances—with all the joy and hope, and all the sorrow and danger of this life—to show that true love knows no limits, particularly when it comes to healing wounds...to show that nearness and proximity, as Pope Francis said, best convey charity and mercy. Love desires the company of the beloved, especially when the beloved is suffering.

And though we do not see this aspect of the Gospel story in the parable, we know that the Word made flesh *took risks*, because love is daring, and the greatest risk He took was that His Heart would be spurned. As His journey reached an end in Jerusalem, the Good Samaritan—Jesus Christ—wept and said, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!” (Lk 19:41) This is the cry and hurt of unrequited love, of the Sacred Heart that was “bruised for our offenses.”

What do the oil and wine, poured into the wounds of the fallen man, signify? Both express charity, according to the school of the Divine Physician. Oil soothes...it is the consolation of good hope, the balm of forgiveness. The wine prefigures the Precious Blood of Christ, the chalice of suffering...the sting proves it purifies, meaning: as long as there is sin, there must be penance. As Msgr. Ronald Knox said, “The avoidance of suffering is not man’s chief business, nor is it the chief business of religion.” You good doctors know that “there is a pain that kills and a pain the heals.” (Knox) In the school of Christian medicine, the Master has assigned great value to suffering united with His own Passion...such that “ours is the pain that heals,” a pain which sometimes includes the discomfort of hearing *and speaking* the truth.

A few more metaphors: the *inn* to which the Good Samaritan brought his patient to recover represents the Church, the “field hospital” in the words of Pope Francis. And what might we expect to find at an

inn...and what do we need from the Church? *Refreshment*—the Eucharist—*fellowship*—the Communion of Saints and those striving to be so—*rest*—Confession, the easing of the burden of a bad conscience. And of course the innkeeper must be...the Vicar of Christ, the Pope!

Some final thoughts: The parable begins with a question: “Who is my neighbor?” And Our Lord’s answer in the form of the parable puts the questioner, a lawyer, to shame. (Thank you, Bishop, for inviting me to the White Mass and not the Red Mass...I am glad I am speaking to a group of *doctors*, as lawyers tend not to come out very well in the Gospel...) In His reply, Jesus proposes no contract, no neat, clean lines establishing neat, clean boundaries and relationships. There is only the untidy reality of human weakness...and the self-sacrificing generosity of divine goodness.

Healing wounds; nearness, proximity; a field hospital after battle; accompanying people. This is the school of pastoral charity in which Christ, and his Vicar, Pope Francis, have enrolled us. For the Christian, the Gospel is always a personal encounter. To be a neighbor in a Christ-like way is to show Christ-like compassion.

We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation. It is necessary to accompany them with mercy. When that happens, the Holy Spirit inspires.

My last point: After Jesus washed the feet of His Apostles, He changed the second part of the greatest commandment—“You will love your neighbor as yourself”—raising it to a new and greater dignity. In so doing, He summarized the doctrinal tale of the Good Samaritan, the retelling of His own earthly life, and thus gave the moral fable even greater weight: “Love one another, even as I have loved you.” (Jn 13:34)