

Boundaries & Borders
[Reflections on “The Good Samaritan”]
Luke 10: 25-37

Sunday 15 July 2007
Nic Denny-Dimitriou, Anglican Church of the Ascension, Hilton

Introduction:

Title

Boundaries associated with protection, setting limits; good boundaries; also associated with power, selfishness; many ‘bad boundaries’

I have done a lot of thinking and talking about boundaries this week

- Doctor in Hilton, who is also the mother of a young child
 - Her experiences re spending time in the holidays with her daughter but people being angry with her for not being available to them at their convenience
 - My situation similar? She asked...
 - Not often, I replied; people very considerate (well trained), and I have also requested some boundaries (e.g. family time in evenings)
 - BUT both noted that for genuine emergencies, we are available day and night, and would drop anything to attend to them; but not so for day-to-day ‘business’ that could wait till another time
- We spoke about another doctor, highly regarded, who stopped practicing in Hilton because so many people refused to respect her boundaries – even walking in the neighbourhood, they asked her for test results, or in the Spar, asked for a quick diagnosis (quite a funny thought, standing at the deli counter and having someone throw open their throat so you could check the state of their tonsils)!

It is a difficult issue. We all have boundaries, it is necessary to have them and to maintain them appropriately. They can be God-ordained / sanctioned [as noted in the “Boundaries” book and course Julia DD has been leading – and we haven’t forgotten the request to offer one in an evening time slot].

But just as there are good and necessary boundaries, there are also bad boundaries.

Some people have very few boundaries – they are usually dysfunctional people. And it is only mentally ill people who have NO boundaries.

Some abuse boundaries by refusing to respect them, and we rightly call them “abusers”. Abuse can be physical, sexual, financial and emotional in character, or a combination, and tragically, our nation has a poor record in this area.

Being healthy in every sense, involving physical, emotional and spiritual health, requires appropriate boundaries. People set their boundaries in different places.

So how do we make sense of the well-known story of the Good Samaritan? I suggest that it is chiefly a story about boundaries, about badly set boundaries that are used to cut out the inconvenience of dealing with the pain or suffering of others.

We know the story so well. I have preached on it before – I did not even need to check on my notes from about 3 years ago on the same Gospel reading, because I can remember what I preached; I called it “Neighbour Fatigue”. The phrase “Good Samaritan” is even one of the idioms frequently used in the English language – like another of Jesus’ phrases, “going the extra mile”. And behaviour like that of the Good Samaritan is considered worthy of repeating, even by non-religious people, and is at the very basis of Christianity along with “do to others what you would have them do to you”.

Jesus’ story IS challenging, because our neighbours – meaning all with whom we come into contact – sometimes seem too many and too needy. That is what gives us “neighbour fatigue”. If it is serious, it can lead us to shut ourselves off, at least from responding to those in need.

Now let me change tack completely. I want to be deliberately provocative to get us thinking further on this; so if at first you want to jump up and protest or leave, please give me a chance to explain myself...

The news has lately been full of items related to the South African Communist Party. I am a communist sympathiser. Yes, a communist sympathiser. On two levels:

Firstly: When Marxist ideology was first being developed, and as it slowly gained credibility among some people in the mid- to late-1800s, a war-damaged Europe was in a period of huge poverty in the midst of rapid industrialisation. Harsh treatment of women and children as labourers was considered a norm, as was slavery in some parts of the world.

People such as communists, and other revolutionaries before and after them, challenged the very notion that one person could “own” another’s labour, whether as slaves or as labourers, especially if it meant harsh treatment and the perpetuation of poverty. They took seriously the suffering of people, and envisioned a more perfect world where suffering was NOT the norm. (In theory at least) they were united across races and languages and gender and other accepted boundaries of the time, boundaries accepted even by good people, and certainly even by Christian people.

It was at a time when some Christians supported slavery. In some countries where the church was powerful because it played a central role in the life of the nation, it did not always speak out against such things. And so others, even people opposed to the Church or to religion, took up issues that the Church did not, on behalf of the poor and marginalized. For that, I am a communist sympathiser.

Secondly, however, I “sympathise” at a very patronising level with people who still pursue a failed ideology. Whilst it certainly has some things to its credit, in general it has been responsible for the most totalitarian, abusive and murderous regimes in history. I’m sure I do not need to continue, for anyone aware of world history in the last century knows what I mean.

But you have to wonder: Sometimes it still seems as if it is people like Communists who take up issues of human suffering. Or is it?

In fact, if you saw the recent movie *Amazing Grace*, or read some of the media articles earlier this year commemorating the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, you will realise that people in the Church HAVE also taken up these issues. Sometimes with minimal success against evil powers. Sometimes slow to recognise the issues – for initially, many Christians opposed the anti-slavery campaigners. Slavery was an accepted institution that made people wealthy and ensured many people had a good income from the products that slaves produced. Besides, wasn't it God-ordained anyway?

William Wilberforce and other Christian people who campaigned, took time to come around to seeing things clearly, and then faced considerable opposition from GOOD people. People who would have been kind to their immediate neighbours, and brought their children up nicely, and gone to church on Sundays (hey – in those days, perhaps even twice on Sundays) – but who had not yet awoken to the evils inherent in the worldwide system of slavery.

I read an article in a recent edition of TIME magazine (July 9, 2007), with great interest. Entitled “Diplomat Without Borders”, it is a play on words, for it focuses on Bernard Kouchner, a co-founder of the organisation known in French as *Medecins Sans Frontieres* [Doctors Without Borders]. It won a Nobel Peace Prize for its work, focussed around people in the medical profession refusing to recognise human-made borders when it comes to suffering. On a non-partisan basis, they will enter any war or other zone of human suffering and catastrophe to render humanitarian and especially medical assistance to people.

Bernard Kouchner is the new Foreign Minister in France. He is an anomaly – a high-profile Socialist in the new Conservative government of the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy. And already he has begun to turn some issues around on the world stage, such as with regard to Darfur in getting more nations together on the issue than has happened previously.

And behind his approach – no, not just behind it, but underneath it and in front of it as well, is this understanding:

“To whom belongs the suffering of people?” asks the new French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner says the suffering of people belongs “to the rest of the world. For that we have to yell and make noise and attract attention.” He strongly argues that there is no longer place for protection of “sovereignty of states” when they continually abuse the human rights of their people. Intervention is called for in order to end suffering.

The part of me that believes in social justice in the name of God, strongly resonates with that. And it is all about boundaries. About borders. And about saying, that where there is suffering, human-made borders become irrelevant.

And that is what I hear Jesus saying in his story. The refusal on the part of two people to respond to the attacked and injured man is based upon things such as fear and religious observance used as an excuse not to be inconvenienced.

The person who disregards those boundaries in the face of suffering, and who responds, is ironically outside the “fold of the faithful”; he is a Samaritan – i.e. neither a pure Jew nor a person with pure religious doctrine. And in responding, he puts the religious people, the people of faith in God, to shame.

Conclusion:

I hope these comments lead us to reflect on our own boundaries. I began by affirming them, in appropriate ways and places, for they are very necessary to our functioning as God intended.

However, Jesus’ story is about the failure of even good and religious people to DISREGARD some boundaries in the face of suffering. Allowing boundaries to do that, somehow disconnects us from our God-given common humanity.

Our community frequently faces issues that challenge us, all the political and poverty and health-related issues that cause suffering and lack of development in our region, and which in the end cause us all to be impoverished in some or other way. And we have responded as a parish, in conjunction with other Christian communities sometimes, to some of these. The recent severe farm and forest fires, followed by the devastation of storms and snow, added to the suffering of some people nearby, and it was gratifying to know of the strong response from many people even from our small part of the community, following on the success of our Jersey Marathon.

In a wider arena, our national political leadership has failed us, and more importantly, has failed the people of Zimbabwe, in its apparent choice of honouring the boundaries of nations MORE than honouring the massive suffering of people. Such behaviour is a betrayal of its professed noble goals of eliminating oppression and eradicating poverty.

Where are your boundaries set? OK, that’s a huge question, for we have many boundaries, according to different circumstances and the different people with whom we interact regularly or occasionally. And some issues of boundaries are national and international in character, and it may seem easy to talk about them because they are “far away out there”. But we also have local boundaries, and personal ones...

So, in the light of Jesus’ story about response to suffering, where do YOU draw your borders? In that aspect, re-using the name of Bernard Kouchner’s organisation, are you a member of “Christians without Borders?”

I find that a very challenging question – for it is posed not by me, it is posed by Jesus. At the end of the story he told, he says to the man who asked the original question: (In showing mercy, like the Samaritan did), “Go and do likewise”.

Ends