

For the Baptism of Michael Andrew Simon Groves
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, 15h July 2007
St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford

The story of the Good Samaritan is perhaps one of the best known of Jesus' parables and it's the basis of many a hackneyed RE lesson in schools. How many of us remember having to re-write the parable of the Good Samaritan by using modern characters. For those of us who work, or have worked, as clergy in a city like Oxford, the parable stalks us. Many times I have walked down Broad Street in a dog collar and, approaching a seller of the Big Issue, can read loud and clear the minds of every single person surrounding me: 'Go on then, let's see YOU pass by on the other side!'. We're generally pretty good at coming up with excuses for not helping those in need on the streets. There's a well known story of C.S. Lewis walking down a street in Oxford with a friend when they're confronted with a beggar. Lewis gives the beggar some change and his friend remonstrates: the vagrant will sure only spend it on drink. 'If I kept the money', replied Lewis, 'I'd only spend it on drink.'

Perhaps one of the reasons for the enduring popularity of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that it seems so clear and obvious that no right-thinking liberal person, Christian or not, could ever reject its central message. It's the kind of parable that our politicians love, for it seems to demonstrate why Christianity can be useful as a set of inspiring moral rules of thumb for the formation of good citizens within liberal democracies. We can teach people to be nice to their neighbour, not to pre-judge the charity of those we might not like – the Samaritans of our own day – and at the same time the God bit seems an optional extra. The Church becomes society's moral police force, the harbinger of traditional values which keep secular society broadly on the straight and narrow. Of course, the God bit is utterly crucial. Why? Because the Parable of the Good Samaritan is about the character of God himself, and it's this that I'd like to address for a moment this morning, and I'd like to begin back on Broad Street.

I'm walking down Broad Street from College to a meeting in the Faculty of Theology on St. Giles. As usual, I'm already five minutes late, and my continual inability to arrive at meetings on time is becoming embarrassing. It's raining, the street is full of tourists and I'd rather get to the Faculty as soon as possible. There on the corner outside Barclays is a Big Issue seller trying desperately to keep her magazines dry. Blast – this could make me even later. Do I have any change? Maybe I can cross the road, promising to myself that I'll buy a copy of the magazine on my way back to College – if the seller is still there. Reaching into my back pocket, I find I have two pound coins. Okay, I stop, exchange pleasantries, hand over my money magnanimously asking for no change and press on clutching in one hand a magazine I will not read. I have overcome my temptation and my excuses, I've made the effort to stop, and for a second I am, apparently just a little like the Good Samaritan, a hero for setting a good example.

Today, we tend to view this kind of giving as pretty laudable. The fact that I made the effort to overcome my temptation not to stop and buy the magazine makes my action all the more praiseworthy. We also tend to see our good behaviour as the result of a good deal of thinking and reflection: what should I do in situation X? Some of you may have heard The Moral Maze on Radio 4. A panel of four people is essentially presented with a quandary – a real moral brain teaser – over which they argue for half-an-hour or so.

Now this kind of moral deliberation tends to focus on particular acts which we might or might not perform. But a good number of theologians have recently pointed out that the way of the Christian can't be focussed on moral quandaries. The Bible doesn't give us ethical formulae like utilitarianism which we can apply to solve moral quandries, and it doesn't tell us what to do in countless situations in which we find ourselves in the modern world. But what the Bible does tell us about is the kind of people we should be – our character. What should we be like? Loving, forgiving, generous. And Jesus makes the most audacious claim – that we should be like our heavenly Father, like God. Jesus himself shows us what God is like. He shows us that God doesn't debate with himself about whether to be generous, and has to make no effort to be good, because goodness and God are one and the same. Neither does God need an occasion or opportunity to be,

say, generous. God doesn't need to be confronted with the poor to be generous, for God is gratuitously and eternally generous. In fact, the whole of creation shows this. All three Abrahamic traditions tell us that God creates from nothing, and not out of any need in himself, for no other reason than his own gratuitous nature.

So if we are to be so ludicrously bold as to pretend that our characters are to be fashioned after God's character, we should not need to debate with ourselves over whether and where to be generous, and neither should we need to be confronted with need or lack in another to be generous. We should be the kind of people who give, because we understand our own lives to be utterly unmerited gifts. Because we understand our very being as the gift of grace, this should make all the difference to the kinds of people we are. And if the goodness of God becomes part of our nature, then acting in goodness should not be a matter of effort, but it should come as easily to us as flight to a bird. The very fact that we find so many moral questions to be unanswerable today, the fact that we have to deliberate so much and are so good and offering excuses for ourselves, indicates that the good which is God is lacking from our nature. It is only by the grace of God, the gift of his Holy Spirit, that we might be fashioned, redeemed, to have characters that participate in the divine character.

In the parable we've heard this morning, the Samaritan seems to have a little something of this divine character. Only a fool would stop on the road to help someone who was probably going to die anyway. Like us, the Samaritan would have found it easy to persuade himself that the responsible thing to do would be to press on. But he quickly tends to the man's wounds and carries him away, no doubt now travelling very slowly and in constant danger of attack. This kind of action can only flow from a character which is reflecting something of the divine nature, a character which has a kind of naïve innocence which, to the world, looks like so much foolishness.

The beginning of the formation of our characters, of being fashioned into the people God would have us be, is baptism, and today as God's people we bring to baptism little Michael. His character will be formed by God through those around him, and it strikes

me that he's surrounded by some pretty big characters. First of all, he is surrounded by an Archangel and two of Christ's disciples, for with Michael, Andrew and Simon he shares his names. He is also enveloped in the love of his family and parents, Peter and Bea, and those of you who know them will agree with me that they are both strong and impressive characters. But of course most importantly, Michael's character, like all our characters, will be formed within the Church, the Body of Christ, amongst us all, by the grace given to us in the sacraments. We have access to that grace through baptism, a grace renewed in us every time we take Christ's body and blood into our very selves in the Eucharist. Today we pray that Michael will grow to become Godlike, gratuitous and innocent, full of grace and truth, his character being fashioned after the one who taught us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, allowing that love to flow to others, that we might love our neighbour as our self.