

15th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

In June 2001, a Palestinian family made an unusual gesture of goodwill in the midst of the bloody violence and deep mistrust between Arabs and Israelis. The Djulani family donated vital organs of their dead son – including his heart – to four Israelis for life-saving transplants. Mazen Djulani was only 34 years old when he died after being shot in the head in East Jerusalem. The dead man's father said he wanted to save lives and to live in peace with the Israelis.

David Cohn, the father of one of the recipients of an organ, said he was “very surprised” by the gesture. “It is really touching, especially in these days when relations are so tense,” he said. “This noble family comes and teaches us that it is possible to do things in a different way”.

When Jesus tells a lawyer that to inherit eternal life he must love God and love his neighbour as well as he loves himself, the question immediately follows, “And who is my neighbour ?” Jesus does not define who the lawyer's neighbour might be, but tells him a story instead – the famous story of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite in the story ignore the beaten stranger by the roadside, even though he is a fellow Jew; in contrast, the Samaritan, who is from a different and despised people, shows the injured man love and care.

Jewish ears would have been shocked to hear Jesus say that a Samaritan stopped to aid the victim. Samaritans were regarded as enemies, and yet here a Samaritan is the good guy. If Jesus had merely wanted to teach about neighbourly love, the third person could have been another Jew, or the victim might have been a Samaritan assisted by a Jew. In selecting a Samaritan for the hero, Jesus was turning the social world upside down and challenging deep-seated suppositions. It was the Samaritan who behaved like a loving neighbour even though he was under no obligation to do so. The priest and Levite, who were supposed to be examples of piety, rejected the opportunity to show love and be good neighbours.

Jesus intended the story to demonstrate the nature of love in God's kingdom. The response to “who is my neighbour ?” is that everyone, including my enemy, is my neighbour. The Samaritan's compassion was costly. It involved making himself vulnerable to attack by robbers because he was walking instead of riding after giving the beaten man his mount. He also made a financial payment to an innkeeper to look after the victim without any expectation of being repaid. Another possibility is that he might have been ostracized by his own people for assisting a Jew.

Jesus directly asks the lawyer which of the three travelers was a neighbour to the injured man. “The one who took pity on him,” he replied. To underline the message still further, Jesus instructs the lawyer to “Go and do the same yourself.”

Jesus asks that we care about our neighbours with the same intensity that we care about ourselves. We are to love as he loved us, and even an enemy is redefined as a neighbour. This love is more than simply smiling at strangers and trying to develop positive attitudes towards people we don't particularly like. The command to love our neighbour is placed immediately after the command to love our Creator God, and it demands a serious effort to elevate the neighbour's needs to the same level as our own. The norm of reciprocity is abandoned. We don't just serve those who serve us, or return favours because we have received them; we are called to love beyond the usual expectations of making special efforts only for family and friends.

Active involvement with the downtrodden and oppressed is a key feature of loving outreach in God's kingdom. It might mean taking initiatives to reach out to vulnerable and destitute people in our community who can never repay our favours. It might mean taking up campaigns for justice and peace which try to tackle the causes of suffering at home or overseas. Working to highlight root causes of violence and war where whole groups of people are demonized as “enemies” will almost certainly draw criticism since this goes against the prevailing culture, but it is what God expects of us. God's love and peace teach us that it is possible to go beyond the boundaries human society has constructed and to do things in a different and revolutionary way