

15c

Little Jenny was being taught that the proper thing to do was to write a 'thank you' letter to those persons who sent her gifts at Christmas. She seemed to do pretty well until it came to Aunt Martha's gift. Finally she finished her note which read: 'Thank you, Auntie Martha, for your Christmas present. I always wanted a pin-cushion, although not very much.'

We are a bit like that. We all want to love our neighbour although not very much - certainly not with the same keenness as the Good Samaritan.

Jerusalem is 800 meters above sea level and Jericho is 400 meters below, so it's downhill all the way. I'm told to this day robberies along that stretch of road happen quite frequently. Jerusalem was God's city whereas Jericho was quite a worldly place, hot as hell in summer and a playground for the rich and famous in winter. So, the man was going alone and in the wrong direction putting himself at risk. His life was going downhill - away from God. And if our lives are taking us away from God we are prone to 'hit the buffers' too but this is where the Good Samaritan enters the scene.

When I was going to school the old catechism answer to the question: 'Who is my neighbour' was: '*My neighbour is all mankind, even those who injure me or differ from me in religion*'. And that was long before we heard of ecumenism or multiculturalism.

The priest passed by on the other side because the law said he would incur ritual impurity to touch a dead body. Being in love with the Law, he overlooked the law of love. Like the priest do we ever give certain people a wide berth whom we wouldn't want to be caught dead with, even though they're going through a rough patch? Do we use political correctness as an excuse for keeping our distance from certain people or situations? Do

we ever step outside our comfort zone or line of duty to help individuals in dire straits?

Also, Jews and Samaritans were often at loggerheads - the Jews shunned the Samaritans because they interbred with pagans centuries before. Jesus, the Jew, cuts through all of this. He wasn't one to be cowed by political correctness. He seems to have a soft spot for the ostracised Samaritans. On one occasion, for instance, we find him sitting at a well, in deep conversation with a Samaritan woman of dubious reputation - much to the dismay of His apostles. Her life-style changed dramatically after that. On another occasion He praises the Samaritan leper who thanks Jesus for his healing, unlike the other nine Jews who show no gratitude.

The Samaritan was 'moved with compassion' when he saw the man. If compassion were the common denominator in all religions then every person would be my neighbour regardless of what religion or ethnic group or class they belonged to. You remember a couple of years ago in Glasgow where a well-loved and respected Muslim Good Samaritan was killed by a fellow Muslim for posting on-line Easter greetings to all his Christian friends.

Actually, it's Jesus Himself who is the Good Samaritan *par excellence*. In the story soothing oil and wine were poured on the man's wounds. But Jesus has gone further. He has poured out his blood for all mankind in order to heal us of the wounds of sin which we have incurred on our life's journey. Unlike the Levi and the priest, he doesn't pass us by.

The story of the Good Samaritan is an invitation to see the world through the compassionate eyes of Jesus and not let fear, prejudice, or even the law get in the way. For the true believer in Jesus passing by on the other side is not an option.