

It is the height of 'The Troubles' in the 70's in Northern Ireland. The young curate ascends the steps to the pulpit in St Mary's Catholic Church in Derry; and he tells a story.

“Paddy O'Shaunessy's boy got beaten up by a gang of thugs and was left for dead in an alley. Fr McGinty came past but he was taking the Blessed Sacrament to a dying parishioner and so he hurried on past. The cardinal drove by in his limousine and saw the collapsed body but he was late for a meeting with the Minister about possible peace talks so, of course he couldn't stop and the car swept on. Then Ian Paisley came past and immediately stopped his car. He got out and checked the boy for signs of life. Satisfied he bodily lifted the lad into the back of his car and drove to A&E. “Take good care of him”, he commanded. “Put him in a private bed and send me the bill.” And, he added, “No press. No publicity. I'm not doing this for any reason except Christian charity.”

Who was a good neighbour to Paddy O'Shaunessy's boy?” concluded the curate. There was no reply from the congregation but the atmosphere was heavy with barely contained anger. There was silence except for the sound, if you listened carefully, of knives being sharpened. The curate left for America soon afterwards. The threats made it clear that he would have been killed if he had stayed.

The same thing would happen to an Israeli who dared speak about a good Palestinian or a Palestinian who spoke well of a Jew.

Jesus' audience, though generally well disposed towards the Rabbi from Nazareth, would have found his parable intolerable. Quite why the Samaritans were despised by their neighbours is not clear. But the hatred was mutual. It had a long history.

After the reign of Solomon the United Kingdom of the twelve tribes broke asunder. Ten tribes in the north ceded from Judah and Benjamin in the South. The two were almost constantly at war. When the northern kingdom of Israel was annihilated by the Assyrians in 722 BC some of the population was deported and peoples from other parts of the empire were imported in their stead. These newcomers mixed with the remnant and the Samaritans were the consequence. They worshipped the one God, YHWH, and accepted the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, but they had their own Holy place, Mount Gerazim in the centre of their land. The assault led by the High Priest of Judah, John Hircanus on the Temple on Mount Gerazim, about a hundred years before Christ will not have enhanced the relationships.

Such was the antagonism between the two groups it is worth asking whether the man who fell among thieves would have been grateful for the generosity of his benefactor.

Quite possibly he would have preferred to be left for dead.

Jesus puts forward a hated figure as a model of right practice; and demeans a priest, who was being dutiful, rightly refusing to approach close to a corpse (as the man appears to be) and thus render himself impure. Everyone knew the only corpse a priest could touch was that of his father in order to perform the more important duty of closing his dead father's eyes.

And no one in their right mind would stick around at a crime scene when someone has been injured, perhaps fatally. Blood vengeance demanded someone's blood must be shed. Anyone at the scene would do in the absence of the perpetrators. And this is the Jericho Road, for goodness sake. It has been one of the most notorious road for bandits in the world, for most of human history. Anyone who took that road on their own was asking for trouble.

Jesus' story would have raised the shackles of everyone who heard him. Even the disciples must have thought this is going a bit far. Only after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection could they have begun to see its meaning. When they saw Jesus as someone who put himself in harms way to aid an enemy, who would, in all likely hood, not be grateful at all for the help given.

Jesus told some great stories, but this one went too far. Stories like that can get a man killed.