

ZE07071303 - 2007-07-13

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-20120?l=english>

Father Cantalamessa on the Good Samaritan

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, JULY 13, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on the readings from this Sunday's liturgy.

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The Good Samaritan

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37

We have been commenting on some of the Sunday Gospels taking our inspiration from Benedict XVI's book "Jesus of Nazareth." A portion of the book treats the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable cannot be understood if we do not take account of the question to which Jesus intended to respond: "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answers this question of a doctor of the law with a parable. In the music and literature of the world there are certain phrases that have become famous. Four notes in a certain sequence and every listener immediately exclaims: "Beethoven's Fifth: destiny is knocking at the door!" Many of Jesus' parables share this characteristic. "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho ..." and everyone immediately knows: the parable of the good Samaritan!

In the Judaism of the time there was discussion about who should be considered an Israelite's neighbor. In general it came to be understood that the category of "neighbor" included all one's fellow countrymen and Gentile converts to Judaism. With his choice of persons (a Samaritan who comes to the aid of a Jew!) Jesus asserts that the category of neighbor is universal, not particular. Its horizon is humanity not the family, ethnic, or religious circle. Our enemy is also a neighbor! It is known that the Jews in fact "did not have good relations with the Samaritans" (cf. John 4:9).

The parable teaches that love of neighbor must not only be universal but also concrete and proactive. How does the Samaritan conduct himself in the parable? If the Samaritan had contented himself with saying to the unfortunate man lying there in his blood, "You unlucky soul! How did it happen? Buck up!" or something similar, and then went on his way, would not all that have been ironic and insulting? Instead he did something for the other: "He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn, and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back'."

The true novelty in the parable of the Good Samaritan is not that Jesus demands a concrete, universal love. The novelty stands in something else, the Pope observes in his book. At the end of the parable Jesus asks the doctor of the law who was questioning him, "Which of these [the Levite, the priest, the Samaritan] seems to

you to have been the neighbor of the one who was attacked by the brigands?”

Jesus brings about an unexpected reversal in the traditional concept of neighbor. The Samaritan is the neighbor and not the wounded man, as we would have expected. This means that we must not wait till our neighbor appears along our way, perhaps quite dramatically. It belongs to us to be ready to notice him, to find him. We are all called to be the neighbor! The problem of the doctor of the law is reversed. From an abstract and academic problem, it becomes a concrete and living problem. The question to ask is not “Who is my neighbor?” but “Whose neighbor can I be here and now?”

In his book the Pope proposes a contemporary application of the parable of the good Samaritan. He sees the entire continent of Africa symbolized in the unfortunate man who has been robbed, wounded, and left for dead on the side of the road, and he sees in us, members of the rich countries of the northern hemisphere, the two people who pass by if not precisely the brigands themselves.

I would like to suggest another possible application of the parable. I am convinced that if Jesus came to Israel today and a doctor of the law asked him again, “Who is my neighbor?” he would change the parable a bit and in the place of the Samaritan he would put a Palestinian! If a Palestinian were to ask him the same question, in the Samaritan’s place we would find a Jew!

But it is too easy to limit the discussion to Africa and the Middle East. If one of us were to pose Jesus the question “Who is my neighbor?” what would he answer? He would certainly remind us that our neighbor is not only our fellow countrymen but also those outside our community, not only Christians but Muslims also, not only Catholics but Protestants also. But he would immediately add that this is not the most important thing. The most important thing is not to know who my neighbor is but to see whose neighbor I can be here and now, for whom I can be the Good Samaritan.

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