



First responder: the Good Samaritan parable painted by the 17th-century artist Jan Wijnants

people at the end of a telephone line if you are suffering from suicidal unhappiness. But, as most regular readers of the Bible are aware, relations between Jews and Samaritans at the time when the story of the Good Samaritan was first told were as poisonous as those between Serbs and Bosnians in the 1990s.

Any story with a Samaritan as a positive character would have been offensive; this one is made still more so by its structure. An injured man at the roadside is ignored first by a priest and then by a "Levite" (a hereditary religious functionary in the Jerusalem Temple): the natural expectation would be that the hero of the story would be an ordinary Israelite, a salt-of-the-earth person just like the average listener to the story. Instead of which it turns out to be a racially and religiously obnoxious figure. And, as interpreters have often insisted, one of the many points of the tale is not that "we" should be kind to "them", but that we, the insiders, the elect, the normal, should be ready to recognize that we are likely to have to depend in important ways on the apparently alien and threatening stranger.

One of the many points: Spencer mischievously declares that "several thousand words of careful, historically, socially and culturally contextualised exegesis on, we can be confident what the parable of the Good Samaritan is all about", and then proceeds to set out a series of "clear" but significantly diverse messages which the story has been made to carry, in ancient and modern times. It's about ethnic prejudice; or religious conflict; or the conflict between law-keeping and spontaneous ethical behaviour; or about the transcending of Israel's historic significance as uniquely the people of God; or the need for ethical creativity; or the imperative to stop asking who is the neighbour to whom you have a duty and start behaving as a neighbour to anyone and everyone you encounter. And so on; and just to complicate matters further, theologians of the early and medieval Church provided a range of allegorical explanations on top of everything, with the Samaritan as Christ, and the Samaritan's two coins for the injured man's support at the inn as the two primary sacraments administered in the Church.

One thing that emerges from this bewildering range of interpretation is that it isn't just a story telling us to be nice rather than nasty to people in need, or even a story encouraging us not to "pass by on the other side" (Spencer notes just how pervasive this phrase still is in public debates about

moral issues). It is after all a story told by a lot of difficult questions about who they are supposed to identify with.

As the story is framed in the Bible, it is Jesus's response to a question from a legal expert: granted that I should love my neighbour, where does that obligation start and stop? "Charity begins at home", surely; I cannot have the same sort of obligation to a single mother in South Sudan as I have to my sister-in-law, or even to the local food bank. And what Jesus's story does is to realising about where love stops (just as elsewhere he refuses to offer criteria for when it's all right to stop trying to forgive or to be reconciled). He directs his listeners' attention to two things – what may get in the way of love, or give us an excuse for avoiding it; and our need to think about where and who we expect to receive love from, as well as how we are supposed to exercise it.

The challenge is to recognize that any number of perfectly "good" reasons can usually be found for not doing what we should (the religious professionals in the story would have had sound reasons for avoiding not only practical risks but also ceremonial pollution if the injured man had proved to be dead); and also to recognize that we are repeatedly humbled by learning what love looks like from profoundly unlikely sources. "Go and do likewise," says Jesus. Be honest about the excuses you want to make, and get over it; be ready to recognize and imitate the reactions of people you normally ignore or despise.

It is hardly surprising that, as the context of the parable becomes less well known, it is co-opted in various ways that make it just a bit banal. Calling someone a Good Samaritan becomes, says Spencer, "a pitiful way of saying 'people who make significant efforts to help those they don't know'". He lists a remarkable number of uses of the phrase in debates in and out of parliament and just to complicate matters further, theologians of the early and medieval Church provided a range of allegorical explanations on top of everything, with the Samaritan as Christ, and the Samaritan's two coins for the injured man's support at the inn as the two primary sacraments administered in the Church.

THE ARCHIVES / ALAMY

Gorse Mites

Matt Howard

Look at this furze in December, still bursting its own spinous boundary. Here, where low heath sweeps to reedbed, saltmarsh then sea. And of all the ways to dream some place in the world, on this trail where the wind isn't up to much, such clotted red blooms under their self-spun billow tent, dew-sagged, dampening gorse-gold with this gorgeous hoary damage.

Matt Howard lives in Norwich, where he works for the RSPB. His debut pamphlet, *The Organ Box*, was published by Eyewear

"Good" reasons can be found for not doing what we should

Margaret Thatcher addressing the Church of Scotland on the importance of the wealth creation that enabled the Samaritan to have resources to help the less fortunate.

In the face of all these varied deployments, summarised with edge and wit, Spencer wisely does not try to insist on any new "canonical" reading of the parable. His aim, it seems, is mostly to alert us to the fact that what looks like an easily available trope is actually a good deal more dangerous, liable to turn from a useful stick with which to beat your rhetorical enemies into a splinter that sticks in your own flesh; very much the way in which Jesus's parables regularly work.

The second issue is to do with what it is about our most passionately held moral commitments that makes us want to cast them in these residually sacred terms – and whether such passion can ultimately survive the dissolution of the sacred. Spencer's deceptively slight essay skilfully nudges us towards some very substantial discussions. *Rowan Williams is a lead book reviewer for the New Statesman. He was archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012*