



## Contagion

The parable of the Good Samaritan is well known, even in these days when fewer people read the Bible. As you may remember, there is a man lying near-dead at the side of the road having been set upon by robbers on the road to Jericho. First, a priest comes up and passes by on the other side; then a Levite (a man of a Jewish religious caste) does the same; it is only when a Samaritan (from the down-at-heel region Samaria) passes by, that someone comes to the man's aid. He is the 'good' Samaritan.

I've read the parable thousands of times and preached on it almost as much. Much as we castigate the Levite and the priest, preachers normally give a token nod to the priest's reasoning: were the injured man actually dead, the priest would have polluted himself for his religious duties and would have to quarantine himself for a period of time afterwards, so in passing by, he wasn't just heartless, he was avoiding this possibility.

Even as we mention this, underneath it, most of us secretly think that he was pretty heartless. Clearly, Jesus' sympathies are with the Samaritan, not with the priest, and pretty much anyone hearing the parable realises that.

Context is a funny thing, though, and in these early days of Coronavirus spread, I find myself thinking again about the priest's situation.

In my job, I meet a lot of people, young and old, in all

sorts of contexts.; it's part of the job description. I also attend a lot of meetings, in small rooms, and big rooms, typically sharing a cup of tea. The chances for catching Coronavirus are high, compared with a normal lifestyle.

And this would also make me a fantastic spreader. Should I get coronavirus unawares, I could well pass it to schoolchildren and the chronically frail. Curiously, for once, we worry less about the children: for whatever reason, it has less effect on them; rather, my worry is for the older folk I play a part in caring for.

There's one old guy who probably wouldn't mind. He's got terminal cancer, and lies in bed, basically ready to go, whenever the Lord takes him. He says he's looking forward to meeting his wife again, but in the meantime, he enjoys the view from his bedroom as the trees come into leaf. He's made his peace with this world, even as his son carefully looks after him, along with some nurses.

But there are dozens of vulnerable people who I could infect who aren't like this. So suddenly, I'm acting out the parable of the Good Samaritan, but following the actions of the 1st Century Jewish priest rather than the Samaritan: if I think you've got the virus, I'll wash my hands and keep my distance; so even if I visit, I'll not get too close, and I'll pray that I don't catch the virus. It's not selfish, exactly: I'm just trying to do my job. But then so was the priest in the story and he didn't get a free ride from Jesus.

*Mar 9 2020 Thought. for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*