

# The Samaritan

Reflections by Christoph Cardinal Schönborn

The good Samaritan is among those figures in the Gospel that have become proverbial. This finds expression, for example, in the charitable organization of the Workers' Samaritan Association. Who is this traveler who did not pass by his neighbor's need with indifference and ignore it?

We begin with a typical theological discussion, the kind held even today: discussion for the sake of discussion, putting forth trick questions intended to embarrass the other person, and choosing subjects that are of immediate interest or are fashionable. At any rate, at that time it was the question of how someone could attain eternal life. Nowadays, where religion and the Church are concerned, the questions that people address are far more superficial, such as those concerning the Inquisition, Catholic sexual morality, or the Church's wealth.

Jesus gives the discussion an entirely personal twist: it is not a matter of what people actually say, and not even of what is in the Bible, but simply and solely of whether you act and live accordingly. Suddenly, this is no longer a general discussion with no implications for anyone, but a discussion that is entirely personal to me.

“Who is my neighbor?” Love of one's neighbor, which is indivisible from love of God—what does it look like? The story that Jesus tells has the answer in itself. To this day, it is still a hard nut to crack. The priest is in a hurry. He is coming away from his duty in the temple at Jerusalem and wants to get home. Perhaps he is afraid of the robbers who have been responsible for leaving this man lying half-dead on the side of the road. Perhaps they are lying in wait for their next victim.

So the best thing is to continue walking. See nothing, hear nothing, and leave quickly. The Levite who comes after him—in a lower rank of spiritual office—follows the sad example of his spiritual superior.

The “full-time” religious people are not portrayed well in Jesus' story. That remains for them (for us clergy!) a constant and serious warning. The Samaritan, who does not pass the wounded man by, is a stranger, a foreigner. In those days, in Israel, the Samaritans were looked upon as enemies of the people, and their religion was rejected as being semi-pagan. It is one of these very people that Jesus offers as a model. The Samaritan interrupts his journey; he does not (as we would say nowadays) look at the clock, nor in his appointment book. Here is a man in danger of his life. Help is urgently needed, and without hesitation, he gives first aid, basic treatment for the wounds; only when he knows the victim is being looked after at an inn does he continue his journey.

A few years ago, I was privileged to take part in an ecumenical celebration for the blessing of the new center of the Workers' Samaritan Association. I was also asked to bless an icon, which had been painted by a Russian clergyman, for the chief's office. The icon portrayed the good Samaritan. And now, the surprising thing: the Samaritan had the face of Jesus Christ. The explanation of the icon painter was that Christ himself is the Samaritan, and we are the wounded man. Jesus does not overlook our need. He helps us and heals us and brings us home into his Father's inn. He thus shows himself to be truly our neighbor. “Go and do likewise!”