



The Parable of the Samaritan and our own invisible wounds

There is no real escape to be had from the endless acreage of advertising garbage which clamours for our attention.

Occasionally, very occasionally, advertising carries better messages, often contrary to the stuff we are commonly fed. Think of the Dove campaign some years ago which featured women who looked like ordinary women; that was because *they were* – deliberately, ordinary women and of all ages. Rejected were the idealised images of commodified beauty. It turned out to be a commercial success. More importantly it confirmed an observed truth about how we are, what life is like.

There is a new poster campaign which is seeking to do something similar. You may have seen it. It is called CALM, which stands for *Campaign Against Living Miserably*. It is pitched at men. Men account for roughly three quarters of the suicides in the UK. The CALM campaign wants to draw attention to suicide as a gender issue and to remove obstacles to men asking for help.

Men can suffer. The operative principle of much of human society and which we call patriarchy (that is, that most of the power, most of the time, in most places, rests structurally with the male of the species) does not mean that men don't suffer.

The CALM website and posters are well designed and witty. They have even created a 'mandictionary'. *Synchromansation* is 'the requirement for a man to match his mates pint for pint, even when he's not in the mood'. *Camanflage* is 'the happy front men wear in certain social situations'. *Manguage* is the 'limited vocabulary' permitted for blokes. *Instaman* is 'the fantasy photographic

life you create online with all the real bits edited out'. And *menshun* is 'to change the subject when a bloke says how he feels'. I like *propamanda*, defined as 'the catalogue of stereotypes aimed at making you a manly man, proper bloke or top lad'.

I have had an interest in the subject of suicide all my adult life, and particularly in those conditions that may lead to it: depression, anxiety, the negative images we seem so easily to generate about ourselves. Thoreau in his book *Walden* noted that many of us lead lives 'of quiet desperation'. That seems to be a fair observation.

Many of us (surely all) are injured in some way or another. We carry wounds. Often these arise from early experiences when as children we were laying the foundations for our later adulthood. Or perhaps in our teens, when detaching from parents and moving towards others: romantic and erotic successes or losses both leave their mark for good or ill and can be significant.

As both the Dove and CALM campaigns remind us, gender stereotyping can be violently restricting and rarely liberating. It can be plainly harmful, and it is simply amazing to see how well it can be transmitted from generation to generation. Is it going too far to think it may play a large part in much of the conflict and violence in the world?

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'Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Jesus) said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and

with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and (love) your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus replied “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And *who is* my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds..... Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he (he gave money to) the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

Which of these three (asked Jesus) do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (The lawyer) said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

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Today’s gospel reading is a bit tricky - but only because it is so very well-known and because its message seems unambiguous. Preachers and writers on it tend to adopt one of two approaches. Either the priest and Levite are being hypocritical and uncompassionate *or* they are being scrupulously obedient to the purity laws of their religions.

The main lesson of course is the one **enacted** by the Samaritan: this character who represents a disdained and even loathed category of person. He bandages wounds and provides care and protection. Remember, too, the context: the lawyer is a specialist in the technical aspects of the Law and is (as we heard) ‘testing’ Jesus. He is

keen not just to know who is his neighbour, but by extension, who isn’t.

I’d like us to consider this parable in a different way – one I realise is taking it out of context. What I have in mind picks up what was said earlier about our own myriad wounds. Not physical wounds but those which most human persons carry in their hearts and minds and memories (and which do sometimes have physical manifestations since our feelings and our bodies are deeply related).

Over the years I have observed that many people who are struggling with fear or depression or anxiety - or some similar crisis of their person - treat themselves with far less gentleness and care than they would were it a friend or someone they know in a similar state. “I shouldn’t be feeling like this” they say; “I have no right to feel like this”.

They would not dream of saying such things to someone else in distress. We want others who are in a dire state of distress or worry to speak of it, and our response would be open handed and merciful; yet often we do not accord ourselves the same invitation or response.

Hearing Luke’s story we may want to identify ourselves primarily with the Samaritan; those more fully aware of their own interior life will also recall occasions when they have played the role of the priest or Levite. I think they probably have a better grasp of the conflicted nature of the human heart. But the claim I’d like you to consider in the light of today’s gospel is that there is a compassion – a mercy – we very often would show towards others that *we do not extend to ourselves*. We play towards our own greatest need and suffering the role of priest or Levite and not that of the Samaritan. We extend care to others who suffer but fail to gently lift ourselves out of the ditch, fail to take seriously our needs and wounds, fail to arrange necessary care.

It is sometimes said this is typical of women: that their role is often that of carer and that

they tend to neglect themselves in the process. I can see the truth of that. I am also certain the same applies to men, though perhaps differently expressed.

The British happen, just now, to be living through a period of heightened uncertainty and for some that is creating fear and anxiety. Further afield we see the madness of dangerous regimes and targeted shootings and apparently irreconcilable conflict. We must keep our nerve and our faith and work in whatever ways we can for the common good – for the world is populated with our neighbour.

And we must tend to the injured parts of ourselves, for unless these are in some way integrated and healed we end up causing harm on the outside, to ourselves and others. This can be so however polished and smooth, competent or mature we may seem to those around us. We can't be a peace builder (or a

whole person) if part of us remains wounded, crumpled at the side of the road, having once been set upon by some experience or circumstance, and remaining unattended to, unheard, unexpressed, unhealed.

Male suicide is one expression of an ocean of suffering human persons are heir to. Others include disdain towards our bodies and other entrenched negative attitudes towards ourselves. *“What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and (love) your neighbour **as yourself**.”* Properly loving ourselves is necessary if we are to hope to properly love our neighbour. Whenever you identify your own wounds, please be sure not to pass by on the other side. Amen.

Hugh Valentine