

Aaron Poppleton
compares the parable of
the Good Samaritan to
healthcare today



CARING FOR REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS

key points

- The three main characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan each shed light on different dimensions of caring.
- The legal expert who questions Jesus may well reflect dilemmas faced by NHS managers puzzling about how to target limited resources.
- The Samaritan is a symbol of some of the issues which occur with care for vulnerable displaced persons where there are racial and cultural issues to be overcome.

What motivates us as Christian healthcare professionals to work with vulnerable individuals such as refugees and asylum seekers? The Bible has a lot to say on caring for those in need. The well-known parable of the Good Samaritan is a notable example:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered, "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". 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live'. But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after

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him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have". Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him'. Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise'.¹

Within this passage, we see three individuals who have quite different responses to the challenges of God's law.

Firstly there's the expert in the law. He stands up to test Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. He knows what God's law says – that he should love God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love his neighbour as himself. However, not wanting to be upstaged by Jesus, he requests a more specific answer. Who is his neighbour? Who is it that he should be seeking to

love? He wants to know how or where he should focus his efforts. Surely this is a man with NHS resource management at heart! Who should he concentrate his limited time and resources on? What criteria should he aim for in order to meet biblical NICE guidelines and to ensure a heavenly rating on his personal CQC outcome? Yet, Jesus has a different kind of loving care in mind, one that is much broader than the expert in the law had grasped. It's a new heart that Jesus requires of people, not knowledge. The question Jesus has in mind is not, 'who is my neighbour?', but 'how can I be a loving neighbour?'

The second person to focus on is the Samaritan. He's the third man to notice the injured individual by the roadside but the only one that shows compassion towards him. He is the one who puts salve on his wounds and dresses them. He goes on to transport the man using his own donkey, which implies that the man's injuries were too severe for him to walk. The Samaritan goes further still, taking the man to an inn and ensuring that he gets further medical attention and care. For a Samaritan to help a Jew was unthinkable. Thus, it is ironic that he is the unexpected saviour of a Jewish traveller who has been left for dead. All the more so when two ministers of God's law, a priest and a Levite, chose not to be associated with the Jewish man as it would make them 'unclean'. The loving care that the Samaritan provided was not conditional on the man's background or status. As the altruistic hero in the story, I wonder whether we would like to see ourselves in the Samaritan's shoes. I know I'd like to think that I wouldn't walk past a wounded individual at the roadside. However, what parallels can we make with our work or study as healthcare practitioners in 21st century Britain? There are many barriers and challenges to providing compassionate care to the patients attending our wards and clinics. Barriers such as time, 'I'm already running late for my next appointment, perhaps I won't address that issue now'; or culture, 'is it appropriate for me to talk about domestic violence or sexual health with my Muslim patient?'; or personal 'they weren't thankful for my efforts last time, why should I work above and beyond for them again?'

Finally there's the Jewish man on a journey, who is left for dead by the side of the road. It's not difficult to see similarities with the migrant situation in Europe today. The media reports on the thousands upon thousands of people who are risking their lives to reach Western and Northern Europe. The horrific trafficking process along the way can leave many physically and mentally traumatised, stripped, and left abandoned. We even hear of some who pay for their journeys with their lives, as they try to escape Syria, Afghanistan, and North Africa. However, unlike the media reports we hear, Jesus does not provide any details about the background of the man in the parable. We are told that the man was on a journey between Jerusalem and Jericho, and the parable assumes that he is

Jewish. Beyond that we have no more information regarding his identity or the purpose of his journey. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't tell us how this man responded to the merciful care given to him by the Samaritan (if at all). We are left in the dark as to whether the man had any expectations of care; if suspicions or accusations were raised by others, such as the innkeeper, as to the Samaritan's motives; how the journeyman felt about being picked up by a Samaritan; or even if any gratitude was expressed by the man.

When we consider Jesus' purpose in telling this parable, the limited background information is fitting. Our neighbour is not decided based on ethnicity, religion, gender or any other discriminating characteristic. Equally, God saves, heals, and sanctifies us through Jesus not because of who we are, but because of who he is. His salvation to us through the cross is not a conditional transaction, but an unbridled, unbounded, and extreme unilateral act of his loving forgiveness and grace towards us. Refreshing ourselves daily through his Word, building a greater view of his character, reminding ourselves of what he has done and achieved for us – this will be a much more compelling factor for us in providing care for vulnerable people, than altruism, pity, or a sense of duty.

This is important; such care can be costly and challenging today in the UK. While providing comprehensive and largely high quality care, the NHS is rich in complex systems, limited in resources, and bound by cultural and legal frameworks. Furthermore, some of our patients can be difficult to love. They can be demanding in their expectations and have a different agenda to what we feel is best. Asylum seekers and refugees are by no means exceptions to this. Their limited finances, often difficult social situations, and uncertainty of residence can further heighten such tensions. Recognising God's forgiveness and ongoing patience towards us will give us patience in working for those who struggle even more than we do with the challenges associated with healthcare delivery in 21st century Britain.

It's not just knowledge we need to care for refugee and asylum seekers. As the parable shows, to use knowledge to provide compassionate and effective care we need to turn our hearts on a daily basis towards the great physician. Through Jesus' self-sacrificial love, shown on the cross, he forgives our sin and meets our deepest need.

Aaron Poppleton is a GP Academic trainee based in Preston.



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references

1. Luke 10:25-37

Keynote address at a CMF day conference on refugee and asylum seeker health, Leeds, June 2016.