

The Man Who Crossed The Street

I often cross the street because I've seen somebody approaching that I don't relish meeting. The person who presses adverts into my hand, the person who pounces on me with a clipboard questionnaire, the zealot with fire in each eye and tracts in each fist will often get me across the street very effectively. I can say the same for invasive "assistants" in shops and effusive "greeters" in churches. (Personally I like to be offered a hymn-book and a hand when I arrive; but then I like to smile and find my own way.)

Ill Temper

This of course is a good example of my very wretched attitude, and a genuine fault on my part. But I hope it doesn't extend to real uncharity. If I wanted someone, I would never be slow to say so, and if I could help a fellow-human being in difficulty I would jump to it. So what's wrong with the priest and the Levite in the Gospel today, who fail to help the mugged traveller? The simple truth is that they daren't go near him *in case he's a corpse*. If they accidentally got tangled up with a dead body, they'd be off work for a week for ritual purification. Whatever they were hurrying towards, they wouldn't be able to do it. So it was, strangely, their ritual duty to steer clear of corpses (*against my religion, mate*). For the Samaritan it is quite different. He isn't a cleric bustling to be ritually pure somewhere else, and he isn't Jewish anyway. So he's *free* to help. He's the original man who doesn't go to church, but is actually better than those who do.

Going To Church

Jesus would have been the first to tell us that we can make ourselves too pure to be of use to others. "The real world" is indeed scruffy and in many ways doesn't match our world of faith. It often forgets the God who makes it and holds it in being; it does gross and vile things, and is not to be trusted with real gifts. So what does God think of it? Well: *God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son, so that all who believe in him might be saved*. That is a bit disarming for a Pharisee who thinks God is honoured by flight from the world. We have to bear in mind that it wasn't because of the rapturous reception he would receive that Jesus was sent, but the very reverse. He was sent so that we could nail him up, and in the process discover the

extent of God's love for us. Today Jesus is telling us to take a good look at our personal religious outlook: does it make us good neighbours with the suffering world, or prevent us from being that? One of the difficulties is that many of us have real phobias about the ways of the world, springing not from genuine Christian love of goodness, but from a fastidiousness and faddishness which separates us from humanity as it really is. How many families are ruined by the members finding each other upsettingly different in small, superficial matters which yet rob them of love? It's serious: the cities of England have a floating population of the young, who have become unacceptable to their elders, and are cast on the waters at terribly early ages, rather than finding solutions and learning to respect each other at home. Faults, I feel, on both sides; and if families are ready to detonate themselves so readily, how on earth are we to find people crossing the road to make friends with possible foreign corpses?

Men In Ditches

Some of us have achieved the blessed state of never having to meet people who've been mugged, or drunks or druggies, or poor people without jobs or homes, or lonely foreign immigrants, or refugees, or any other person we might group under the "undesirable" category. We feel we've earned the right, because of our good upbringing and education, and our ability to acquire a certain standard of comfort and sound economic security, to pass our lives in rest and quietness, perhaps even in a walled enclave behind an electric gate; therein to tut over the shocking stories in the seamier pages of the *Daily Mail*, and thank God for our happy estate in the eternal Safety Zone. Hmmm....recognise The Rich Man?

Sudden Surprise Change Of Plan

Time to reverse this pernicious segregation of ourselves, and go across the street in the opposite direction, to change the story for the poor and the oppressed. Time to risk the specious peace of mind that rests on so blatant a selfishness, for the sake of following Christ, who "came from highest bliss Down to such a world as this": who embodies a far greater sacrifice than we can ever make, and tells us: Go, and do likewise. *Fr Philip*