

HE CAME WHERE HE WAS

Trinity VII

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, July 10th 2016

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Negotiating one's way into the Portman Square multi-storey car park, where our car normally resides, is a challenge in itself. Will the automatic barriers work, will there be yet more spaces cordoned off because of leaks in the ceiling, will the spaces be too narrow because of bad parking? But up until a month or so ago was a further and rather different challenge. Facing one soon after the entrance, was a poster with a close-up of a very worried, even tortured looking middle-aged man. The caption was: 'They saved my life.' *They*, of course, were the Samaritans, known world-wide now for their remarkable record in averting suicide.

Now for a riddle. What is the connection between that poster and the now defunct but once rather up-market comic, *Eagle*? Some of the more senior of the men here may remember the *Eagle*. It was a comic for boys. The answer to my riddle is simple and has strong resonances very local to here. The connection is Father Chad Varah. Chad was the vicar of St. Stephen's Walbrook, only a couple of streets away down near the Mansion House. Chad and his friend, another Anglican priest, Marcus Morris, persuaded Hulton's Press, who published the news magazine, *Picture Post*, to publish *Eagle*. It was the comic which included *Dan Dare* the space traveller and his evil interlocutor the *Mekon!* My favourite character in the *Eagle* was *Harris Tweed*, a comic private detective, as I remember.

Varah was one of a remarkable generation of clergy and laity whose Christian belief translated directly into action. Richard Carr-Gomme, a layman, had founded the Abbeyfield Society caring for the elderly. Trevor Huddleston, the Mirfield father, fought for justice in South Africa. George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, had worked for reconciliation and to stop the carpet-bombing of Germany.

Remarkably Chad Varah died less than ten years ago and today's readings bid us revisit his vision. Born the son of a clergyman on Humberside, Varah had trained at Lincoln Theological College and then served his title as curate of St. Giles, Lincoln, right at the top of the hill and near the centre of that ancient city. Amongst his most harrowing experiences was presiding at the funeral of a young girl who had taken her own life. On experiencing her first period, she had feared that she had some scandalous sexually transmitted disease. She committed suicide.

Varah was clear that had she had been able to talk but briefly with a disinterested outsider, someone with whom she could say it all, she need not have died. We all know the rest. Samaritans have saved countless lives; they have encouraged the depressed to seek professional help; they have listened when others seemed either not to care or to be a threat to them. Even the founding of that new comic had a very serious aim. It offered accessible, stimulating and fun reading but with a wholesome base too.

It is, of course, St. Luke's parable of Jesus which gives its name to this estimable group. It is a most telling tale, however many times one has heard it. Luke, from whose gospel the story comes, collects uniquely some of the most powerful of the parables uniquely. The Prodigal Son, the Publican and the Pharisee, and the Good Samaritan are three of the most remarkable. The background to this last one is well known. The Samaritans were an eccentric branch of the Judaism of late antiquity. They were what the Christian tradition would call heretics! It was on this count that they were despised, shunned, excluded from ordinary society. A quaint version of this group still survives today, in modern-day Palestine.

So Jesus tells the tale of the man attacked by bandits and left to moulder and probably die. Rather like characters in Graham Greene's novels, the professionally religious do not engage. The priest and the Levite were both religious apparatchiks. They simply didn't want to get involved. We shall all have doubtless felt like that on occasion. An incident happens in the street and it could be embarrassing or even dangerous. So these professionally religious people 'pass by on the other side.' That's become a cliché and part of common parlance.

The Samaritan was the most unlikely saviour hence the power of Jesus' parable. The King James Version of the story which we heard, captures it stunningly and uniquely. It says simply that the Samaritan *came where he was*. It is a most remarkable English construction inasmuch as four short words say so much. Initially it enters into no detail but simply says, *he came where he was*.

In those four words are crystallised the love and activity of God in Jesus. In Jesus, God comes where we are. God comes as one of us. He could come no closer than inhabiting our humanity. But in doing so, he sets in train an entirely new possibility for all humankind. We too are invited to be where God is, we too are offered *divinisation, coinherence* – being at one with God. That is the extraordinary jewel in the crown of the Christian faith

But it comes, of course, at a price. For it challenges us to be as God is to us. We are called, in Christ Jesus, to be where others are. That poster of the haunted man in the car park now speaks still more sharply to me. When others were in prison did I visit them, when naked did I clothe them? Earlier in the week, unloading the car, an entire bag of books fell to bits in the road. I sought to recover them at a dangerous crossroads. Within a split second an Indian woman dashed out, gave me her Selfridges carrier bag and saved the day. It was very powerful in a week, when others have scrawled signs saying 'Poles go home.' She came where I was – and I must do the same. Amen.

Readings

Deuteronomy. 30. 9-14.

Colossians. 1. 1-14

Luke. 10. 25-37