

Villages - September 2024

We have just been on holiday visiting family in Austria (again), and our car broke down (again), so we had to call out the AA (again). And after a similar 1.5 hour wait, the same young man turned up to loom at our car, with a smile on his face that probably meant, “I cannot believe that after last year you were stupid enough to drive this same car back to Austria again.” The big difference this time, however, was that rather than having to tow the car to a garage where it stayed for 2 months, he was able to fix it simply by the roadside.

Why am I writing this, other than to elicit your sympathy?

Because I wanted to draw attention to a very simple act of generosity which made our lives easier. The man from the AA didn't just fix our car, he also showed me how to resolve the problem myself the next time. And there was a next time, and another. And the trick worked. So I didn't need to call him (or one of his colleagues) out, so potentially he missed out on work, which potentially reduced the profitability of his company, which might one day put his job at risk.

Now of course he didn't think like that. We would say that he acted like a human being. He had a chance to make our lives simpler, and he took it, and I imagine the majority of us would do the same. We like to share advice, recipes or surplus fruit and veg. Many of you help out a neighbour in need.

Why does this matter?

Because some people tell us that we are programmed to act automatically in our own interests. Our biological goal is to ensure the survival of our genes, or at least those of our tribe. Which means that every time we help others we either think it will help us in some way (the “I give way to ambulances because one day it might be me needing it” approach), or because we have developed the ability to recognise ourselves in others and welcome them into “our tribe”.

This cooperative approach was so important to Jesus and his earliest followers that both reasons were pushed. Jesus famously said “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, and St Paul claimed that one of Jesus' main achievements was to gather all humanity into one, breaking down human divisions of race, sex or

economic status: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Recognising the common humanity in all of us is at the centre of the Christian faith, even if it is sadly too often absent in practice. The hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not simply for life everlasting, but for a reconciliation between us and our creator which frees us to see each other as fellow human beings rather than rivals.

Of course life is difficult, and there are many people in our world who feel hopeless and that others are succeeding at their expense. They feel shut out and disadvantaged. And this affects wealthy and poor, native born and immigrant alike. These are tough challenges when so many are living day to day in hope and fear, and I certainly don't think I have the answers, nor that any one political party is the solution. There are limited resources, and trying to balance different needs and rights is difficult.

However, I do have one warning for us all.

It is often said that the first casualty of war is the truth. But that's not quite true. The first casualty of war is very often the humanity of the other. We justify our fight for survival by ejecting certain people from our “tribe” and thereby making them less valuable than ourselves. We can see it in those parts of our world where that fear has turned into war, but we also see it simmering in our own country.

Nele and I regularly marvel at the generosity and energy with which you all help each other. I have rarely known such a supportive community as our villages. All I would ask of any of us is that we continue to work towards a world where we can all live in peace.