



**Diakonia Council of Churches Good Friday Service
Sermon Delivered by**

Fr Albert Nolan, OP

**21 March 2008
Durban Exhibition Centre**

Who is my neighbour?

The question has echoed down through the ages from one generation of Christians to another.

It is all very well to say that the great commandment is to love God and to love one's neighbour, but who is my neighbour?

For Jesus our neighbour is everyone – absolutely everyone without exception. No matter who they are or what they have ever said or done.

We know that. And yet down through the ages we have made exceptions. We have excluded these people or those people. Not them! We have excluded people who are different from us, people of a different race or religion or nationality or political camp.

In Jesus time the Jews excluded Samaritans. They hated Samaritans because Samaritans were heretics and traitors. They were not pure Jews. They lived in a neighbouring country but they were not thought of as neighbours, as brothers and sisters.

So, when this good Jewish lawyer who had kept all the commandments (he says) asks Jesus the big question: But who is my neighbour? Jesus answers by telling him a story about a Samaritan who went out of his way to help a Jew who had fallen among thieves.

Is he not also your neighbour? Are Samaritans not also our neighbours? Should we not love them too? In fact, despite the

hostility between Jews and Samaritans, this Samaritan showed amazing love for a Jew? Jesus then challenges him powerfully by saying: "Now why don't you go and do the same yourself? You can learn something from that Samaritan."

The lawyer would have found that very difficult to accept. I can hear him saying: "But how can we love these people? They are our enemies; just as the Romans are our enemies. Are we supposed to love the merciless and cruel Romans too?"

Jesus' answer was shocking, to say the least. "You have been taught to love your neighbour and to hate your enemy. But I say to you, *love your enemies*." In other words all your worse and most wicked enemies are also your neighbours. Love them too.

Jesus then spells out what this means:
"Do good to those who hate you.
Bless those who curse you.
Pray for those who persecute you."

This is what Jesus himself did. And this is what made him such a great person, such a magnificent example of unconditional love. He identified with all human beings. And so he was able to say: "Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters you do to me. And whatever you did not do for the least of these my brothers and sisters you did not do for me."

As we sit here on this Good Friday morning in Durban in the year 2008, we are faced once again with the question: "Who is my neighbour?"

And the answer is *Jesus* – hanging there in agony on the cross. He is my neighbour. He represents all human beings. He has identified himself with all of them. Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me? If you don't love them you don't love me. If you treated the hungry and the thirsty as your neighbours and fed them and gave them to drink you did it to *me*. If you clothed the naked and visited the sick, you did it to *me*. On the other hand, if you refused to help them you refused to help *me*.

If you refuse to treat people of a different race or religion or nationality as your neighbour, as your brother or sister, then you are refusing to treat *me* as your brother, says Jesus.

We know the story of Paul's great conversion on the road to Damascus. He was struck off his horse by a great light and he heard a voice saying. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" "Who are you?" asks Paul. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" came the answer. Paul was persecuting the early Christians because he saw them as his enemies. But Jesus says: "You are persecuting *me*."

As we sit here today contemplating Jesus on the cross, we ask ourselves: "Who are we persecuting? Who are we excluding? Who are we not treating as a brother or a sister? And who is *my* neighbour?"

Some South Africans find it difficult to accept our neighbours from across our borders. We call it xenophobia, the fear and even hatred of foreigners. We persecute them, don't we? Perhaps today we can hear Jesus saying: "When you do that you are persecuting *me*."

We think particularly of the millions of people in Zimbabwe, our neighbouring country, who are suffering and will continue to suffer. They are our brothers and sisters. We dare not exclude them from our love and concern, lest we be accused of excluding Jesus himself. "Whatever you do to them, you do to me."

This year Good Friday falls on March 21 – Human Rights Day.

The question, Who is my neighbour? can also be asked in terms of human rights. We can ask Who has the right to life? Who has the right to freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of religion? Who has the right to housing, food, water and health care? Are some people to be excluded?

No. These human rights enshrined in our constitution are for everyone, for all our people. To exclude some people is to exclude Jesus.

March 21 was formerly known as Sharpeville Day. We remember that fateful day when 69 people were shot dead and many more injured. A gross violation of human rights if there ever was one. A massacre.

Some of us can remember the pictures in the newspapers at that time, pictures of bodies spread out across the streets of Sharpeville. Today we can look at that scene and say; "There are my neighbours – every one of them."

And then we can look at those who did the shooting and say “They too are my neighbours.” We can and must deplore what they did. We must hate their sin and reject it in no uncertain terms. But what Jesus is challenging us to do is to hate the sin but love the sinner – as he did.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ that we commemorate on Good Friday was surely the greatest violation of human rights ever perpetrated. Jesus was the victim of an unspeakable crime, but as he was dying he managed to pray for those who persecuted him. “Father forgive them,” he prayed, “for they know not what they do.”

My neighbour is everyone, all human beings – without exception.