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**Jacopo Bassano assisted efforts of relief for the sick and poor. His artwork reflects the ethical emphasis prominent in the history of interpretation of Christ's parable.**

# Stopping to Help

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The parable of the Good Samaritan, here depicted by the Italian Mannerist painter Jacopo Bassano, beautifully illustrates generosity and support of one person for another devoid of prejudice. The artist chose this theme, in the cultural context of Catholic Venice in the sixteenth century, in order to take the church of his day to task for failing in its obligations to care for the sick and needy in the society.

The parable, which is recounted only in the Gospel of Luke, was told by Jesus to instruct a lawyer who was testing him (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus responded to the lawyer's opening question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" with questions of his own, "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" After giving "the right answer" that you should love God and your neighbor (combining Deuteronomy 6:5 with Leviticus 19:18), the lawyer, seeking to "justify himself," asked Jesus one more question: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with this story.

Most of us learn the parable of the Good Samaritan from a young age, for it is a gem of masterful storytelling that can illustrate a simple message (being kind to your neighbor) suitable for children. But when we rehear the parable as adults, fully aware of the ongoing Palestinian and Israeli conflicts of our era, the events in the Gospel story become more complicated. We wonder if a Jewish lawyer could have regarded the Samaritan (like a modern day Palestinian) as a model of kindness as he traveled through Judea, and are amazed the Jewish innkeeper would even trust him.

Bassano recreates the moment that the Samaritan lifts the traveler who was stripped and beaten by robbers on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and prepares to put him on his donkey. The animal is visible on the right side of the painting. The lighter color of the saddle allows its outline to be found in this darkened area. To the right of the Samaritan's foot are the flasks from which oil and wine were poured on the traveler's wounds. The body of the traveler is positioned on an elevated rock that enables the Samaritan to get behind him to hold him up. The bandages, applied earlier by the Samaritan, are already red with blood that has soaked into them.

Two other figures are visible on the left side of the painting. According to the narrative, they are a priest and a Levite who have seen the traveler but passed by him on the other side of the road. The second man, the Levite,

holds two sticks and appears to be reading. This detail is not mentioned in the Gospel text, but presumably it was introduced in the iconography to accentuate the contrast between the Levite's ostentatious, but actually superficial, religiosity on the one hand and the Samaritan's exemplary brotherly love on the other. Bassano employs this motif more emphatically than his northern colleagues. Lost in his book only a few steps from the spot where the helpless victim lies, the Levite walks to the background while the Samaritan, in the foreground, leans in the opposite direction.<sup>1</sup>

Both of the passersby wear dark clothing. In contrast, the Samaritan wears a rose-colored garment with a flask attached to his waist. The distant city has been identified as the artist's home town of Bassano. It was a walled-city at the base of the Monte Grappa that is clearly defined and visible against the aquamarine of the landscape.

Jacopo Bassano was a simple man by the standards of his contemporaries. Yet his interpreting biblical texts and recreating them into pictorial statements gave him the power to voice his opinions (without words) at a time of lively religious and social debate. His "readings" call for a return to a way of life more in line with the scriptural stories. The artist assisted the efforts of relief for the sick and poor in his day. He encouraged a generous and genuine rapport between people. Like his life, his artwork reflects the ethical emphasis so prominent in the history of interpretation of Christ's parable and is an inspirational model for the Church's mission today.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

1 Bernard Aikema, *Jacopo Bassano and His Public: Moralizing Pictures in an Age of Reform, ca. 1535-1600* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 48-49.

2 For a more detailed study of the art and theology of this painting, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance Painting*, volume 2 (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 82-109.

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