

## A True Neighbour

The day had started really well. Ben had taken delivery of his brand new, sleek, state-of-the-art, four-hoof-drive donkey and led it to the big supermarket, Gateway of Jerusalem, where he tethered it in the donkey park. When he had finished his week's shopping he loaded it all carefully on the donkey's back, making sure the weight on each side was even and that everything was secured tightly. Then he set off for Jericho.

Soon he had left the city behind him and all he could see was sand and rocks. There were no trees and not even a blade of grass. It wasn't a good place to travel alone because there was the danger of muggers in that lonely place. But Ben seemed to be the only traveller that day so he just kept walking and hoped it would be alright. As the sun rose higher in the sky the wind became more hot and dry. Ben had already promised himself that when he reached the next town he would buy an ice cream from his favourite stall: Walls of Jericho.

But just as he turned the next corner, he was suddenly surrounded by fierce muggers. One of them hit him and another grabbed the lead of his donkey. Others grabbed his bag, hat, cloak and water bottle and soon they had vanished as quickly as they had appeared. They left him helpless at the side of the road.

When the dizziness passed, Ben realised that although the muggers hadn't killed him, his life was still in danger. He was still a long way from home but also quite a way from Jerusalem. He didn't have the strength to walk back there, especially without water to drink and a hat to protect his head from the sun. His only hope was that another traveller would find him and help him to safety. After a long time, Ben finally saw someone trudging up the hill towards him. From his clothes, he looked like a priest.

Ezekiel the priest had been looking forward to this journey for ages. The priests took it in turns to make the sacrifices in the Temple and at last his turn had come. It was a great honour and he wanted to make sure he did everything exactly right. It was very important to keep clean everything that mustn't become dirty. He had had a long bath before he set off from home and made sure that all his clothes were spotless. He knew that he must also only think clean, pure and holy thoughts and avoid anything bad. When he first saw Ben, he thought he was dead. Dead bodies were one of the unclean things he had to avoid so he kept well away from him on the opposite side of the road. As he got nearer, he heard Ben groan so he knew he was still alive but he could also see that his head was bleeding. If he stopped to help Ben, Ezekiel would get dirty. If he took him to Jerusalem, Ben might die on the journey and then Ezekiel wouldn't be allowed to make the Temple sacrifices because he had touched a dead body.

Ben's hopes were raised and then dashed as he saw Ezekiel come towards him and then turn away and leave him. He didn't know any priests personally but he knew that they were holy men who were greatly respected because their work took them very near to God. Ben didn't feel near to God. Perhaps the priest was right and he really wasn't worth caring about because he was unclean, not just his body and clothes but inside, the person he really was. So he was beginning to feel that death was all he deserved when he saw another figure coming up towards him. He wasn't a priest but he looked like a man in a hurry.

Matthew was a very important man in Jerusalem, one of the people who make things work. He wasn't a priest but he also worked in the Temple, organising everything that happened, especially for the great festivals when thousands of visitors would come from miles around. When he saw Ben he was shocked at seeing another mugging and decided that something really should be done about it. They should have regular armed security patrols to protect travellers from muggers. It would need to be organised. Should he form a committee? No, committees take minutes and waste hours. How about a working party? No, the last one he was on was all work and no party. He promised himself then that he wouldn't join another working party unless they **guaranteed** balloons and funny hats! So how about a focus group...? Then, when Matthew came near to Ben and heard him groan, the thought struck him that maybe this was a trick! Perhaps Ben wasn't really wounded at all but was just one of the gang of muggers! If Matthew stopped to help him, the rest of the gang would jump on him. So he kept clear of Ben and walked even more briskly towards Jerusalem.

So Ben's hopes were raised and dashed once more. His mouth was very dry and his head was very sore and he wondered how much longer he could last. Then he heard the clip-clop of donkey's hooves coming from behind him. This might be his last chance to be rescued. With all his strength he turned over to see who was coming down from Jerusalem and his hopes fell as soon as he saw that the man was a Samaritan. Ever since he was a boy, Ben had known that Samaritans were bad people. If anyone told a story which had heroes and villains, the Samaritans were always the villains. Ben didn't know any Samaritans personally, of course, but he knew that they were all bad. So all he expected of this Samaritan was that he might come and see if the muggers had left anything worth pinching. But the stranger gently lifted Ben out of the dust and put his water bottle to Ben's mouth. Normally Ben wouldn't have dreamed of accepting a drink from a dirty Samaritan but now he was too thirsty to refuse. The cool water felt like the best drink he had ever had. Then the stranger went back to his donkey, brought some ointment and bandages and cleaned up Ben's wounds. Slowly he helped him onto the back of his donkey and the stranger led it back on the road to Jericho.

Eventually they reached Jericho and the stranger headed straight for the inn and asked the innkeeper if he had a room where Ben could stay. Ben wondered how he was going to pay for a room as the muggers had taken all his money. Maybe he would have to wash dishes for a week. Then he heard the stranger pay for Ben's room and tell the innkeeper that if it cost any more he would pay him on his way back.

Ben had scarcely time to say goodbye and the stranger had left. Ben didn't even know his name. He knew nothing about him but he had treated him as he would his dearest friend. He thought of the people he knew best, the neighbours he had grown up with. Would any of them have done as much as this stranger had? There was no way that Ben could repay the kind stranger but he decided that from then he would try to treat everyone he met as neighbour rather than a stranger. Perhaps one day he could be the one to help a stranger in need and be a good neighbour to them.