Like many of you, I have read or heard read the parable of the Good Samaritan on dozens of occasions. On many of them, I have found myself both challenged and consoled by it.

The question the expert in the law puts to Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” is one that many today find challenging. Does it include people of different colour or ethnic identity, people of different educational, economic, or social standing? The neighbour, Jesus insists, is everyone, especially those who are weak and vulnerable.

The characters in the parable play different roles, roles with which we are invited to identify. The individual who falls among robbers, for example, represents a person or persons suffering and in need. Possible contemporary parallels to his situation are numerous. For some the issue is poverty, for others violence and abuse, for others again the challenges involved in being an immigrant or taking the path of refugees.

What contributes to the parable’s emotional power is the fact that it focuses on an individual. Its lesson, however, can be applied to groups or even countries. One might think of the Rohingya (Rohinga) and their genocidal mistreatment by the military in Myanmar or the war in Ukraine and the horrendous suffering of so many of its civilian population.

The unique response of the Samaritan is brought out both by the parable’s description of his actions and by its portrayal of the refusal of the priest and the Levite, representatives of the traditional religious establishment, to make any effort to come to the help of the victim of the assault. They see the man, but refuse to allow themselves to be touched by his plight. They see but in the most superficial of ways. What they don’t see is that the man lying half dead by the side of the road is a fellow human being, someone made in the image and likeness of God, someone like themselves.

The priest and the Levite pass by, Jesus says, on the other side of the road. The implication is obvious. They want to keep as much distance as possible between him and them. They probably think that if they stop, they will be caught up in something that will interfere with whatever they have already planned for the rest of the day.

From an early date, Christians came to see in the Samaritan a figure of Christ. His care for the man who fell among the robbers both offers us a model of how we are to act and an affirmation of his concern for us, especially for those among us who in one way or another are suffering. Our needs are many and varied. Some are spiritual, some psychological. Ohers are physical or economic. Some are the result of devastation of war or natural disaster

Jesus, the Good Samaritan, draws near, sees our pain and binds up our wounds. His gifts are above all spiritual. He gives us courage and hope, peace and the possibility of reconciliation with God and with one another.

I remember visiting the great Gothic cathedral at Chartres in France some years ago. Among its many extraordinary stained glass windows are a series dedicated to the story of the Good Samaritan. The lower half of the window tells the story we find in today’s gospel. The upper half offers a Christ-centred interpretation of it.

For the designer of the windows, the man lying by the side of the road represents humans, victims of sin and violence, alienated from God and from one another. The inn is the community of faith, the church. It is called to welcome and listen to those who suffer and to help them deal with their need and their pain. The two denarii the Samaritan leaves with the innkeeper have been interpreted differently. In one way or anther they represent the grace and gifts that come to us from Christ through the church.

This interpretation is clearly not the one that Jesus had in mind in recounting the parable. It is not difficult, however, to understand how such an interpretation came to be embraced by people of faith. It helps to explain the positive sense we can come away with after listening attentively to the parable.

A few years ago, Pope Francis invited believers to celebrate with him a year focused on the theme of mercy. His hope was to help us recognize and welcome God’s mercy for us and to urge us to be merciful towards one another.

The pope made clear that a major goal of the year of mercy was to aid the church and all of us as individuals in it to rediscover what he called “the spirit of the Samaritan.” It should be at the heart, he said, of all that the church preaches and all that it attempts to do.

Today’s reading ends with Jesus asking which of the 3 characters in the parable was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. The lawyer answers, “The one who showed him mercy.” In response, Jesus urges him and us to go and to do likewise.