

Matthew 9: 35 – 10:8

True Compassion

We probably know that feeling we get in our stomach when we are going down the first drop of a roller coaster. It's the same feeling when we hear horrible news. Our stomach feels like it has just been kicked in or turned over. The New Testament has a Greek word for that feeling, it is 'Splagchna'. It literally means bowels or guts, but it is translated 'Compassion'.

The only person that this word is associated with in the Bible is Jesus. It says that Jesus felt this when He encountered those who were ill, the blind, the demon possessed, those who had lost loved ones, the hungry, the lonely and the bewildered. Our word 'Compassion' comes from two Latin words (com and pati); literally means 'Suffering' with 'others'.

There is a verse in our readings for today that I would like to keep at the forefront of our minds. 'When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, 'He had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.' Jesus had compassion for the people. But what does that mean for us to love and to have compassion?

Not so long ago many charities and organisations were complaining about compassion fatigue. The busy, self-occupied average person spent very little time engaging with the needs of those across the world, or even in their own neighbourhood. Initiatives were getting tired, volunteering was at an all time low and charities were having to find more and more innovative and exciting ideas to generate fundraising for causes which otherwise would not attract funding. We perhaps had a very narrow view of compassion and requests for it often passed us by.

However, recently compassion has raised its profile. Significant work has gone on over the last few months by people exhibiting compassion - within our NHS, by those who advocate for the poor and forgotten, by those who have kept our schools going, and by those who have served the local communities by running foodbanks or delivering parcels to the housebound and much of that has been undertaken by those of little faith or none. Therefore, when we do not have the monopoly on compassion (and thank God we don't) there is a challenge to us as Christians to demonstrate what it means to show Christ's compassion.

We all know that some are especially gifted in this way – able to identify with others and others are called to particular vocations. Some in our churches are especially gifted at praying or sharing their faith. But we are all required to pray and share our faith, whether we are gifted at it or not. The same is true of compassion. We are all meant to cultivate compassion. So today our gospel reading helps us to consider how we can cultivate compassion, which is authentic, involves the whole of one's life, inspiring others and making a difference to those we meet, bringing lasting transformation both physically and spiritually.

A prominent section of St Matthew's Gospel is devoted to the commissioning of the disciples for a journey. It is probably aimed at the readers of Matthew's story more than the original disciples, at those who hear the Great Commission and who have that assignment to 'make disciples of all nations.'

It is all rooted in the activity of Jesus. Before the Commission, in our passage we have a summary of all that Jesus had been doing in and around Galilee. The disciples are invited not to do their own thing, but to engage in a mission established and lived out by Jesus himself.

So firstly, we are called to see people with Jesus' eyes, to see what he saw.

We are often tempted to look at the outward appearance, to judge people by their looks, or by their wealth or lack of it. There is a whole industry out there, designed to base choices on things external when we as Christians are to see things in the light of the eternal. We are to look beyond the superficial and to look at the heart with compassion. 'The Lord does not look at the things mortals look at. They look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.' 1 Samuel 16:7

The comparison of the crowds to a sheep without a shepherd, evokes a picture of bewilderment, lostness and vulnerability. Jesus is the one who shows us very dramatically what God's love is like. It is a forgiving, accepting, caring, merciful and compassionate love. It is love full of self-giving, a love which was willing to sacrifice His Son so that reconciliation might be brought about on this earth.

That love of God is seen through Christ and the cross, but at the same time, the love of Christ is seen today through the actions of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of people. Paul says very clearly, that you and I are 'Little Christs' out in the world. People see Christ today through us, through you and me, so to show compassion we need to see what Jesus saw.

Secondly, we are called to touch people where they hurt, to feel what he felt. In Mark's gospel we read of a man with leprosy coming to Jesus and begging him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing' he said, 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cured.

The amazing part of this healing is how Jesus did it – Jesus touched him! Even if he had not been healed physically, this would have begun to heal him emotionally. Physically leprosy patients don't feel pain, but they suffer as much as anyone. Almost all the pain they feel comes from the outside, the pain of rejection imposed on them by their surrounding community. They are rejected because they are contagious. Their body is rotting. They smell. They are deformed and so they were forced to live outside the community. They must keep their distance from everyone – even their spouse and children. They knew great loneliness.

The Christian writer Philip Yancey tells the story of Dr Paul Brand who has devoted his life to treating leprosy patients in India. In the course of one examination Brand laid his hand on the patient's shoulder and informed him through a translator of the treatment that lay ahead. To his surprise the man began to shake with muffled sobs. 'Have I said something wrong?' Brand asked the translator. She quizzed the patient and reported, 'No, doctor. He says he is crying because you put your hand around his shoulder. Until he came here no one had touched him for many years.'

The lack of physical contact is one of the most devastating consequences of the Coronavirus crisis. People have not been able to comfort loved ones by holding a hand or giving a hug. In the church physical blessing had not been possible. Our bodies were built to meet and greet, to connect, to touch. It has been an enormous deprivation not to be able to do what Jesus did.

However, touch can be expressed in other ways as we feel for those around. Leprosy has been termed the disease of the unwanted. Many experience this in different ways too. Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is a most terrible poverty and we are called to feel that too. To empathise with those who have very little, who are trapped by situations not of their own making and who see no way out. Compassion for these people means reaching out to them too.

The whole commissioning in Matthew's gospel takes on a remarkable quality when we finally reach the list of names of those commissioned and discover who are included. There are the despised, there are the political enthusiasts, and there are the ones who have the potential to oppose the very Christ who welcomes. There are friends and enemies, there are doubters and extraverts, there are

the greatest and the least. Inclusion is something all of us must work at, but clearly here we see it as a basis for mission, a symbol of possibility and an agent for transformation.

So, we are to feel what Jesus felt

And the third way to cultivate compassion is to do what Jesus did. The crowds in the Gospel, who have been pictured as a flock harassed and thoroughly exhausted, are now envisioned by Jesus as a bounteous harvest. In his compassion Jesus sees beyond their obvious need and declares that they are ready for the message of the kingdom.

The dilemma is that the labourers are few, and therefore His commission is one of both prayer and action. We are reminded that this is God's mission and not ours. The rightness of the moment and the choice of the messengers are not just human decisions. What a relief! Prayers of intercession and supplication become essential, since God alone honours faithfulness and brings about the success of the proclamation.

St Paul says in Ephesians 5 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.'

You and I are to be as Christ in this world. When we eventually gather back together, as we take stock of these last months and reflect on the new compassion we have seen in the world around us, it will be essential for us as a Church to be rebuilt as the people who do what Jesus is calling us to do. That will vary from one church to another, from one community to another and that may well be hard as Christ's mission is often met with rejection and opposition.

The story is told of a young girl whose mother was very beautiful – all except her hands, which were shrivelled and scarred. One day the girl asked her mother about her hands. The mother told her how their house caught fire when the girl was a baby. The mother rushed upstairs to the room where the girl was sleeping, and with the help of God found the strength to carry the baby downstairs and outside without being harmed. But in doing so, the mother's hands were badly burned. This brought sobs to the child as she said 'O mother, you know I've always loved you – especially your face, your smile, your eyes. But better than all, now I love your hands.'

Hands that are wounded and scarred and full of compassion. Compassionate hands, just like our Lord's. As we come out of lockdown, and reconsider our mission as churches, let us see as Jesus saw, feel what Jesus felt, pray as Jesus prayed and do what Jesus did, offering our Christian hands of compassion to a needy world.