

Come and See

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

Pentecost 8, 22 July 2012

Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I am often in Civic on a Friday night. Soon I will be at St Pip's Youth group instead! Well, I was in Civic a few weeks ago and had some time to just sit and watch the world go by. It is a very instructive thing to do. No one of course made eye contact with me - not that I particularly wanted them too - but it was interesting to notice what did occupy them. It was generally rushing from one place to another, hurrying in and out of shops or talking on mobile phones and colliding into other people. Some were socializing with a purpose or lugging bags around or dragging children along or hurrying in front of the children. Occasionally a pair of lovers would meander past holding hands and gazing into each others eyes - very sweet. The homeless wrapped in their blankets looked for handouts and the security guards made sure no one sat in the wrong place (something I occasionally do). Except for the lovers, the world in Civic that night was a bustling place, a hurrying backwards and forwards of busy people.

In our gospel story today there is a lot of hurrying and rushing about. The people of Galilee are now hurrying to get to Jesus. The apostles have come back from their trek through the towns and villages where they have talked about Jesus and proclaimed his message. They have had a busy time of it preaching and healing. Herod is in his palace, far to the south of the sea of Galilee, drinking and partying with his mates, winking at pretty girls and beheading prophets. The Romans are present but uninvolved occupiers who demand their taxes and prop up a corrupt local government. In villages, towns and by the rivers and seas the people of ancient Israel are desperate for leadership and help and they begin to flock to a young prophet. They hurried and rushed to get to this young man.

And he had compassion for them...he had compassion for them.

Oliver Davies, an English theologian, has said that we should perhaps talk more about the compassion of God and less about the love of God. As Paul Ricoeur noted talking about love is either too easy or too difficult. It is certainly a term that gets thrown around a lot and at times misunderstood. Love gets mixed up with romantic love or needing to love unconditionally those who you are in relationship with or the love you have for family and friends. God *is* love but depending on your mood or theology, God can seem like a wishy washy romantic who feels warm and fuzzy or a judgmental parent whose righteousness demands sacrifice. Compassion on the other hand is a much clearer idea with which to work.

Compassion comes from the latin meaning to 'suffer with', 'to feel with', if you like. Yet it is not just a feeling. There are three parts to compassion. A perceptive part, a feeling or affective part and an action part. That is, in compassion we see another's distress, we feel moved by it and we actively seek to remedy it.

In our gospel reading Jesus is a man of compassion. In the care of the apostles, the teaching of the crowd and the healing of the sick, Jesus is a person who notices what is

happening in people's lives. He feels for them and with them and he tries to do something to help. The fact that he helps with miraculous power should not blind us to that very simply three step act of compassion, perceiving, feeling and doing. Actually, the miracles of Jesus are not done as acts of supernatural power to show us that there is a God, a God who with a snap of the fingers can solve all our problems. The feeding of the 5 thousand, the walking on water, the healing of the sick, all of them, are about the *in breaking* of the Kingdom of God in and through Jesus.

They are about how God in Jesus reaches out to us and into his creation in a new way. A way full of compassion. A new way that comes in full force with Jesus death and resurrection, God's ultimate act of compassion.

Jesus has sometimes been called "the Compassion of God" or the "tender mercy of our God", from Luke 1.78. In Jesus Christ, the compassion of God enters the world. In flesh God begins a new chapter in his relationship with us and creation. In flesh God feels our pain and joy. In flesh God touches, embraces, walks with, heals and comforts. This is a radical affirming of the other and of creation. To borrow a phrase from James Allison, God doesn't just love us, he likes us! He like us so much he came and hung around with us. This is not some lofty God who is distant from the world. This is a God who becomes one with the world in the most messy and fleshy way.

Of course this is one of the most scandalous ideas in the Christian faith. Along with the doctrine of the Trinity it is one of the things our Muslim brothers and sisters just do not get about us. How they ask, can God, who is wholly other, wholly powerful and transcendent, completely beyond this material world become *human*?! One of the answers for me must be - but what a human! A human full of compassion, mercy, love, forgiveness. A human who sees us as we are, is abandoned by us, tortured and killed by us, yet comes back to love us even again.

But compassion is not just for the Son of God. It is something as followers of Christ that we are all called to embody, to incarnate in our own lives and relationships.

Those three simple parts of compassion, perceiving, feeling and doing, will tell another person a profound and transforming story. For instance when you can see me, feel for me and with me, when you can be alongside me, present, listening, open, forgetting yourself and your preoccupation's, you are also telling me, with no words, that I am of infinite value and that there is nothing more important that you should be doing than being with me. You see me, you feel with me and for me, you sit beside me. In a world that is frantically busy, a world where it seems people are more troubled, more disillusioned, more lonely, more depressed, more addicted, than ever before, compassion is vital.

Of those three aspects to compassion the basis is empathy, that is the capacity for us to feel how others feel. It is in this empathizing with others - people in danger or distress, sadness, sickness and sorrow - and feeling how they might feel that we may be motivated to refrain from harming them, and hopefully even perhaps consider helping them. If we can have even a little sense of what their lived reality is like perhaps we can find the energy to make a difference. What a radical idea!

So what stops us doing this? Well, there are few things - compassion fatigue is one. For those in the helping professions where the practice of compassion is central, one can get

emotionally weary and drained. It is lack of energy, not care, that is the problem. Isn't it wonderful then that in our reading Jesus himself shows us how to deal with that problem. He says to the apostles, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while". We must balance our compassion for others with love and care of ourselves. It is impossible to keep high levels of compassion available when we are physically and emotionally run down.

The early desert fathers and mothers found out about compassion when they went to the desert to be alone and pray. The solitude of the desert became "the furnace of transformation" where they learned compassion. And when they returned to "civilization" people experienced their compassion as the healing of God. In our daily lives it is easy to focus on the needs of others or the distractions of work and entertainment. But when we are alone we can take the time to be re-energized and refreshed. We can take the time to let God's Spirit renew us and fill us.

What gives you rest and joy? What fills your being and makes you delight in what you are doing? What makes your body tingle, your heart sing and allows your soul to rest? I don't know what it is for you but I do know we are allowed to feel good, be rested and made whole by the simple blessings in life. Dear friends, find all those ways to love and nurture yourself and find that precious time to fill your life with God and God's spirit.

The other thing that can put brakes on our compassion is our fear of suffering. Our fear of pain and suffering, either in ourselves or in others, can so overtake us that we spend all our time building our defenses against the world. It is hard and uncomfortable to sit with those in pain and distress.

What we need is a faith and trust that can help us overcome our fear of suffering, so we can embrace the world as it is, love it, warts and all, and live our lives with friend and foe alike. Our way into this trust and faith is through Jesus Christ and what he revealed about God's compassion. He gives such an amazing picture of compassion. He had a compassionate concern for the welfare of others, especially those no one else cared particularly about.

For Jesus a compassionate concern meant nothing less than a passionate commitment to them. But Jesus doesn't merely show us the way and tell us the way; he *is* the way, the way of compassion. William Barclay, the Scottish theologian explains it like this:

"Suppose we are in a strange town and we ask for directions. Suppose the person says: 'take the first to the right, and the second to the left. Cross the square, and go past the church, and take the third on the right and the road you want is the fourth road on the left'. If that happens, the chances are we will get lost before we get half way. But suppose the person we asks says: 'Come. I'll take you there'. In that case that person is the way, and we cannot miss it. That is what Jesus does for us. He does not only give us advice. He takes us by the hand and leads us. He walks beside us, strengthens, and guides us, every day. He does not tell us the way; he is the way".

Now I have to add this bit....

You know the very first thing Jesus says in John's gospel, to the first two disciples is, 'What are you looking for?'. What is the next thing he says when one of them asks where he is going? He says 'come and see'. He doesn't tell them and give them directions. He invites them to follow and he shows them the way. Those words, come and see, that we

have on our web site, our bulletin and all over the place were said first by Jesus and then by Philip. Since we have them before us so much they can be a powerful reminder that Jesus is the compassion of God. The Way to fullness of life.

Let me leave you with a thought bubble... imagine that when you went to the mall or the supermarket, the shop attendant served you with compassion?! He sensed your fatigue, your confusion, your stress.

He allowed himself to empathize with you and he then went about serving you efficiently, calmly and with a warm smile. Imagine that? Imagine the leaders of our political parties having compassion for each other - for each others hopes, fears and struggles? Imagine them helping each other - not tearing each other down. Imagine that? Imagine a school playground, a work place, a family, a church, where our predominate feeling was not anxiety about getting on and getting things right but compassion - truly seeing each other, feeling with and for each other and doing whatever small thing we can to make life better. Made better by laughing with those who laugh and weeping with those who weep and tending to all those in need or pain.

The place this begins is here (heart). In each one of us. If we want a world of compassion then we must start with ourselves. If we want to know the way to live a life of compassion, to have the intent and energy to do so, then we look to Jesus. We follow him. We deepen our understanding of him and build our connection with him. We become his way. We become like him, one step at a time. He says, to us 'come and see'.

May we become the compassion of Jesus Christ as he was the compassion of God. Amen