

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The compassion of Jesus

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

Some years ago one of the actors in the television show *The Bill* was being interviewed on radio here in Australia. He related how when he'd left home at 18 to go to London to train as an actor, his uncle had given him a Bible as a parting gift. Although he had a Catholic background he didn't see himself as a religious person and had never read the Bible, but because it was there and his uncle had said to him, "Just read it", he began with one of the records of Jesus' life. Nothing in his background, he said, had prepared him for the utterly compelling attractiveness of Jesus, the manliness and kindness and perceptiveness and strength of this man who claimed to be God.

It was a life-changing experience for that young man. He became part of a church and through all the joys and sorrows he'd been through since that time, he'd known beyond any doubt that God had been with him in them.

What is it about someone who lived so long ago in such a different culture from ours that's still attracting people to him and changing the way we live?

One of the things that made Jesus so compellingly attractive was his compassion for people in trouble - the willingness to put himself in their place and feel what they were feeling. But it didn't stop there. It moved him to reach out to them - to do something to meet their need or say something they needed to hear.

"Filled with compassion" is how those who knew him described him. For example, in response to a man with leprosy, pleading on his knees to be made clean, we read that "Jesus, filled with compassion, reached out his hand and touched him." Touching a leper would have been to the people who saw it almost as incomprehensible as what happened next, when the man was immediately cured of his leprosy. Likewise for two blind beggars who shouted at Jesus to have mercy on them, we read that Jesus had compassion on them. He touched their eyes and immediately they could see.

After some days spent healing sick people and teaching the huge crowds who followed him, Jesus said of himself, "I have compassion for these people. They've already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I don't want to send them away hungry or they may collapse on the way." His concern moved him to act. He took the seven loaves and few small fish his disciples had found and divided them over and over until, miraculously, thousands "all ate and were satisfied."

Another mention of Jesus' compassion is in the gospel written by Matthew:

"When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Harassed and helpless. That's a picture of humanity that's still true of us today, as we try to satisfy our longings with bigger and better things and deal with all that's wrong in human relationships.

To know someone feels what we feel can make a huge difference as we struggle with our troubles and failures. But like the servant in Jesus' story, who couldn't forgive even though he'd been forgiven, we can't always find it in ourselves to have compassion for others. We use the phrase 'compassion-fatigue' to describe our unwillingness to respond in practical ways to the plight of our fellow human beings, preoccupied with our own problems as we are.

But Jesus was able to put aside his own needs, which he also had as a human being. Like the time when his cousin, John the Baptizer, was beheaded. He'd had a great affinity with John, so would surely have felt great sadness, and John's death must have confronted him with the suffering he knew *he'd* face. So we read that "when Jesus heard what had happened he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."

It wasn't to be for long. The crowds heard about it and followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd he had compassion on them and healed their sick. He put aside his own need to be by himself to pray, until late in the evening of what must have been a very long day. That's the mark of true compassion - forgetting our own needs to focus on the needs of others.

We can feel harassed and helpless as we look at the way the world is - disharmony everywhere. As individuals we can be out of harmony with others and even with ourselves. Still we find it hard to admit the connection between all that disharmony and our own failure to love God, and love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

There was once a letter to the London Times that finished with the question, "What's wrong with the world?" A letter in response was printed the next day,

*"Dear sir,
What's wrong with the world? I am.
Yours faithfully,
G.K.Chesterton.*

For God to ignore the damage our self-will does would be neither loving nor just. Instead, he's responded with the greatest act of compassion, which is beyond comprehension and almost beyond belief. He took on human form and bore in his body his own just judgement on the havoc we wreak. That is to say, the compassion of God is seen supremely in the death of Jesus.

It was truly a death for others. Humanly speaking he'd done nothing deserving of death. Even the Roman governor Pontius Pilate could see that, and said so three times. It made no difference, because Jesus' accusers knew how to manipulate Pilate, and so prevailed.

The other reason Jesus had no need to die lies in his claim to be God, evident in so much of what he did and said. For example, he pronounced people's sins to be forgiven and promised to raise to eternal life all who believed in him. So as God, the Creator and Sustainer of life, he would not have been subject to death.

In fact Jesus evaded death several times until he knew the right time had come. Then he deliberately and very publicly entered Jerusalem and created a commotion in the Temple. That goaded his enemies to risk acting on their long-held resolve to kill him. A few days later they had him arrested. Peter tried to fight off the soldiers who came to arrest him, but Jesus said, "Put your sword back in its place. Do you think I can't call on my Father and he'll at once put at my disposal twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?"

Jesus was immediately put on trial where he condemned himself to death with his claim to be the Son of the living God. Pilate was amazed at his refusal to defend himself, and said, "Don't you realize I have the power either to free you or to crucify you?" To which Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it weren't given to you by God."

Other things Jesus said about his death tell us that death for him was not inevitable as it is for us. It was a choice he made. For instance, he said of himself, "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many." He also said, "I am the bread that gives life. If anyone eats this bread he will live forever. This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world."

Such was his great compassion for people cut off from God, enslaved to self, harassed and helpless. There's no greater way to put yourself in someone else's place than to die for them.

In one of Edith Schaeffer's books she talks about travelling the world with four young children, and discovering how dressing them in their most attractive outfits made a difference to the way they were treated - by customs and immigration, airline attendants and so on. In theory we should treat everyone the same, however they look on the outside, since everyone's made in the image of God. But in practice we find ourselves much more drawn to the pretty and handsome, and whoever we perceive as successful. We also warm to those who warm to us and find it easier to extend our compassion to those we love.

But the compassion of Jesus is different from ours. He felt it for those others shrank from - the diseased and deformed and damaged, even traitors and other outcasts of society. In his world women were easily scorned and despised, especially those judged to have fallen into sexual sin, even when it was more likely they'd been dragged. Jesus' very different attitudes towards them, and to others who were looked down upon, stand as a rebuke to our more superficial assessments of people's worth. But we also take comfort in the way he saw people, because we too are scarred and sore and ashamed of what's ugly in our lives. Jesus knows how we feel and is filled with compassion.

Some years ago I met a refugee from Africa, a widow with seven children. She was lamenting the loss of her luggage on the way to Australia, and perhaps other things as well, like the security of communicating in her own language - in fact everything familiar to her. She was beginning a new life, but on the bottom rung of what must seem a very high ladder. Yet she smiled and said, "Whatever happens, I still have Jesus." She knows he understands exactly how she feels and she's trusting in his compassion for the harassed and helpless.

We can be glad God feels for us, but still left with the age-old question, "If God is really filled with compassion, why does he remain silent?" The apostle Paul wrestled with this problem over what he called his thorn in the flesh. God didn't take it away, but he did show him his grace toward him was enough.

In his book, *In The Grip of Grace*, Max Lucado comments on Paul's thorn. He asks, "Do you wonder why God doesn't remove temptation from your life? If he did, you might lean on your own strength instead of on his grace. Why can't we be free of the difficult people in our lives? Maybe God wants us to love them as he does. Why doesn't God answer prayers for healing? He may choose to heal parts of our body before we get to heaven. But if he doesn't, if he never give us more than eternal life, his grace in our struggles now is still enough."

The apostle Paul was left with his thorn in the flesh. So Lucado concludes, "For all we don't understand about thorns in the flesh, we can be sure of this, that it's better for us to have a limp than a perpetual strut. If a thorn helps us depend on God, he loves us enough not to pluck it out."

Conclusion

The Jesus who was filled with compassion for the harassed and helpless is the same man who came out of the tomb where his corpse had been laid, to be the Lord of all life and our only hope. And in his risen power he promised to be with and in all who turn to him, a promise that's captured in this prayer by Christina Rossetti.

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numbed too much for hopes or fears.
Look right, look left, I dwell alone.
I lift my eyes, but dimmed with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in a falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf.
My harvest dwindled to a husk.
Truly my life is void and brief,
And tedious in the barren dusk.
My life is like a frozen thing;
No bud nor greenness can I see.
Yet rise it shall, as sap in spring:
O Jesus, rise in me.