

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Compassion

Graeme Best

I was recently speaking with a person who distances themselves with all things Christian and she enquired with regards to an incident concerning a mutual friend. This friend had been rather harshly dealt with by his church where a lack of compassion seemed to have been displayed, and her immediate response was, "Well that's not very Christian, is it?"

It could be said that the distinguishing characteristic of Christian behaviour, as seen by those outside of the Christian faith, is that of compassion. To be Christian is to be compassionate.

And this is right for the apostle Paul says in Colossians 3:12 "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion .. with kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

This morning I would like you to reflect on the question: "Am I a person who is known for my compassion?" Compassion can be defined as sorrow for the sufferings or trouble of another .. but with the urge to help." Compassion isn't just empathy which is an intellectual or emotional identification with another. Compassion is not only understanding how someone else is feeling. It is combined with that desire to do something. To alleviate the suffering of someone else.

Compassion is characterised by action wherein a person acting with compassion will seek to help those for whom they feel compassionate. Take our Lord Jesus for example. Matthew 14:14 says "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick."

Matthew 15:32 says "Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." ... and as we know, he went on to feed thousands of people using just a few loaves of bread and few small fish. A mighty miracle that flowed out of a heart of compassion.

Jesus, being fully human as well as fully God, related to how people were feeling. He understood their physical needs. But he didn't just understand their needs, he did something. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He caused the blind to see and the lame to walk.

Yes, he could do miraculous things because he was God come to earth. We can't perform miracles like he did .. but we can still do acts of compassion. We can lend a hand. Provide a meal. Lend some money. Give someone some of our time. Maybe a listening ear or a hug.

But Jesus not only cared about the physical needs of people. He also cared for their spiritual needs. Matthew 9:36 says "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples "the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore to send out workers into his harvest field.""

And Jesus answered that prayer by not only sharing the good news of salvation himself but by preparing his disciples and the likes of Paul to take the good news of sins forgiven to the world. Likewise, we too can share this good news with others. That's compassion.

Jesus, was a man of great compassion. The ultimate example. To be Christian is to be like Jesus? To be Christian is to be people of compassion.

And not just compassionate towards those who we think deserve our compassion. Or people we like. No .. Jesus didn't pick or choose. Neither did a man called Richard Selzer. Let me tell you about him in a moment.

Richard Selzer was a surgeon but unlike many of his colleagues he didn't spend his days off sailing or playing golf but spent them in the city library. There he met a fascinating community of people who spent most of their days reading magazines and having free cups of coffee.

Although there were never any formal introductions there were often conversations. He never even knew any of their names but he had given them nicknames based on qualities that seemed to define them. In their conversations Selzer learned that one man, that he called Neckerchief, suffered from arthritis that Neckerchief described this way, "The hinges is rusted."

One day Selzer noticed that Neckerchief seemed to be walking with considerably more pain. He sat beside him and asked very quietly "Is it the hinges?" "No" was the old man's reply. "It's the toenails." At that moment Selzer made a decision. He stood up and told him that he would be back shortly.

Selzer went back to his office and retrieved a black medical bag with a kit containing foot care paraphernalia. In it were small saws and files and large clippers that could cut through bone. Selzer sat beside his library friend and whispered, "Go down to the men's washroom. I'll be down there in a few minutes. I brought some stuff to help you out."

The man looked somewhat puzzled at this suggestion but said nothing. He stood up and walked slowly toward the bathroom – each step very painfully taken. Selzer then got him to sit on a toilet then he knelt in front of him and removed his shoes. Then he carefully removed two pairs of socks, both stained by clotted blood. Then he saw toenails that curved around each toe like the horns on a mountain sheep.

Each toenail dug into the sole of Neckerchief's foot and every step drove it into the unprotected flesh. Selzer took some toilet paper and went to the sink and dabbed it in warm water and came back to the stall. Slowly and carefully he washed between the toes, removing the caked blood. He took the tools out of his black bag and began to cut and saw and file away the toenails that were almost as thick as the horns they resembled. It took him ages but finally the nails were trimmed and filed. He replaced the shoes and socks.

Neckerchief was so grateful. He now had a spring in his step. From that day on, Selzer's black medical bag became a constant companion on his days off. Discreetly he would sit beside other members of his library fellowship and ask them about their toenails. Very few days off did not include a trip to the washroom with a person suffering from overgrown toenail difficulties.

Richard Selzer was a man of compassion. He saw a need and he took action.

The example of Richard Selzer is not only a reminder to us of the fact that we should be compassionate, but it also is instructive to us in how we should offer our own acts of compassion.

You see, we can offer compassion in ways that remind the recipient who is the generous one .. who is the powerful one. We can offer compassion in ways that establish our superiority. But we can also offer compassion in ways that affirm the recipient. That demonstrate equality and genuine love.

Remember, Jesus warned those who gave and fasted and prayed to fanfare that they had already received all the reward their acts of piety could expect. Jesus urged that acts of love and compassion really should be offered in quietness and with discretion, with no thought of reward. Not to make us look good. Or build our ego. We should to leave any reward up to God because he sees the heart as well as the hand. The giver as well as the gift.

But we are to show compassion. God calls us to. Jesus showed us how. And also, simply as a thankful response to the compassion shown to us by God. His compassion was such that he gave his Son to die on a cross for our sins in order that we might enjoy forgiveness and receive eternal life through faith in His Son.

Psalm 103:8 says "The Lord is compassionate and gracious. Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." Surely because God has shown us compassion .. we should extend the same to others .. whether it be a hand out .. or a hand up. Whatever. Christians, we should be known for our compassion.

The example and teaching of Jesus has in fact inspired many Christians throughout the centuries to forsake their own desires and to care for the lame, deformed, broken-hearted, sick and dieing. Yes, even to love and care for one's own enemies.

We could cite countless wonderful examples of Christian compassion from the past and present. Mother Theresa is a well-known example. There is a Christian organization appropriately called Compassion caring for children throughout the world. Truth is, every single day in virtually every country of the world, God's people are following the example of Jesus and showing compassion to their fellow human beings. Meeting physical, emotional, economic, social .. spiritual needs.

But what about you and me? There are people around us every day who are in need. But do we ever stop to consider their need? Ever stop to think about how we could help them .. in Jesus' name? Unfortunately in this 'me first' world in which we live, we so often fail to consider the needs of those around us. And so the challenge is there for us to follow God's call and example .. and show compassion to those in need.

Compassion. It's not just a feeling. It does something. It's the Good Samaritan. Not those who walk on by on the other side, ignoring those in need whether they be across the street or across the world. Compassion feels and compassion does.

And so, who in your life needs compassion, right now? A son. A daughter. A father. A mother. A neighbour. Friend. A child in Africa?

When Jesus saw their needs, he had compassion. Do you and I even see their needs? And if we do, do we have compassion? Are we moved in our heart to do something?

Yes, compassion means involvement. It takes time. It costs us. And no, we cannot meet every need. But we can do something for someone .. and bless both others and ourselves in doing so.

And so, can I challenge you, as I challenge myself, to be people who, like Jesus, are filled with compassion. To be Christian is to love and to live like Jesus. To be Christian is to be compassionate.

May God bless you as you bless others this week. Thanks for listening.