

Sermon Notes from 10 am service 22 August 2010

Jeremiah 1 v4-10

Luke 13 v10-21 (Healing of a woman on the Sabbath)

True compassion

It is around 2,000 years ago in Galilee. You are on the edge of the crowd that has been following Jesus around and so you follow him into the synagogue. You haven't up to now been able to hear everything Jesus said but you get the drift of his specialness and certainly are impressed by his healing powers.

So in you go on this Sabbath. You see this poor woman, a well known character. In a village where everyone is known people would know who she was and how long she had been like this. She was bent over and we can imagine she may be somewhat odd in her talk as Luke says that she had an 'evil spirit'.

You see Jesus, who has been the centre of attention and talking with authority, showing compassion for the poor woman. He places his hands on her saying, "Woman, you are free from your illness!" You see her straighten up - the first time you have ever seen her straight – and she praises God for her healing.

What is your impression? The official of the synagogue is so tied up with the correct procedures and strict observing of the religious laws (doing no work on the Sabbath) that he discounts or overlooks the humanity of the situation. Healing was viewed as part of a doctor's profession, and practising one's profession on the Sabbath was prohibited. The Law is being flouted. The official may also have been feeling jealous of the attention this visiting rabbi is receiving. His own position of authority is being threatened.

There is a parallel here with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Levite and the Priest hurry by, putting religious rites and procedures ahead of showing compassion for the individual; not wanting to be 'unclean' in the eyes of the strict Laws and rituals.

Religion can be seen as an institution. The Sabbath day was an epitome of Jewish religion – the day of rest – a gift from God. But it was so fossilized and encrusted with traditions that it had become distanced from the spirit of the faith.

Jesus shows grace – the official shows lack of grace. Rules and Laws are there for a purpose but compassion – loving your neighbour – must not be crushed by them.

Jesus answers the criticism of his healing (i.e. working) on the Sabbath by calling them hypocrites as they would see to their animals on the Sabbath if necessary.

You are there watching and listening. You see the point Jesus is making, and how happy the healed woman is shouting out and praising God. Now you know that you are in the presence of someone special. This is the one you should follow!

Jesus has gone on to talk of the Kingdom of God growing, like a seed planted in a garden or a small amount of yeast being used in making bread. Jesus has sown a seed in you this very day. You decide that you will follow him more closely – perhaps get to the centre of the crowd in future so that you can hear all he says.

There are times when we have to be aware that following procedures or rules or common practices need to be challenged or the rules bent when following Jesus indicates a different action. As many will know, my wife Brenda cracked her femur. She was taken in agony to A & E. The doctor who examined her had to manipulate the leg to assess the situation. He then said they needed to X-ray the leg and because Brenda was in pain he would take her to the X-ray department himself, rather than wait for a porter which can take some minutes. Another older doctor saw him pushing the bed and questioned him. “That is for the porters. As doctors we should not be doing this” and so on for quite a few seconds.

“My patient is in great pain” he answered and continued to push the bed into the corridor and to the X-ray department. It happened that we met a porter along the way who took over. I thanked the doctor. “Well,” he said, “there are times when you need to use your sense and not strictly keep to the laid down rules. He showed compassion.

In most jobs there is an area or element where you can do the basic work according to what your employers require, but there is an area where at times in following Jesus you may need to go the extra mile, give your client or customer or colleague extra time and consideration. We are not robots and each of us needs to feel valued. Over reliance on rules and procedures can impersonalise.

On flying back from Los Angeles, before the leg had broken, as Brenda had difficulty in walking a long distance we arranged wheel chair assistance at the L.A, Airport and at Heathrow. The woman wheelchair porter at L.A. was monosyllabic, did her basic job of pushing the chair and getting us through passport control etc., but certainly wasn't gracious, didn't smile or do anything other than the very minimum.

At Heathrow, the porter – a friendly Polish young woman - was smiling and welcoming, asked where we had been and took us past the official point where she could have dropped us off. I know who gave us the better feeling.

As Christians our attitude towards others reflects how they view us as Christians. If we are like the Los Angeles porter then what does this say about being a Christian. If we

are open and smiling and welcoming this says something about being a Christian.

I told the following story from the 2nd World War some 6 years ago, but a good story is worth repeating:

After their long trek into Russia the German Army was defeated. The Russians decided to parade the captured soldiers through the streets of Moscow to where they were to be interned – as a morale booster.

Soldiers lined the route to keep back the crowd of mainly women –the men were mostly in the army – many of the women had lost a husband, son or father killed by the hated Germans.

First in the parade came the German officers – smartly uniformed, goose stepping with superior pride, perhaps still confident they were the master race. The crowd were shouting and throwing stones and rotten fruit, their anger and noise dominated the scene - then followed the ordinary soldiers, shambling past in torn dishevelled bloodstained uniforms, with arms in slings, some hobbling or on crutches, some supported by their comrades.

As the apathetic half starved soldiers shuffled by, the noise from the crowd ceased. All that could be heard was the unrhythmic shuffling of boots on the cobbles.

Suddenly an elderly woman broke through the soldiers lining the route. She thrust a piece of bread into the hand of one of the soldiers. This sparked off others and soon women were giving apples or cigarettes or bread to the soldiers as they passed.

What initially had been bald hatred had turned to compassion. They had begun to see the men as individual human beings who were suffering, and not as Germans who must therefore be hated.

It is also interesting that the officers showing pride and even contempt did not elicit this compassion. It was the humble suffering foot soldiers who received the better welcome from the Muscovites.

There is a lesson there for us –to see the person and not the stereotype – like the hoody in my play acting earlier.

Love your neighbour involves compassion!” It sounds so easy – until we realise that our neighbour isn’t the people much like us who live next door, but everyone, everywhere. With this commandment God challenges us to explore what we are able to do. The list is endless for there is virtually no limit to the human need within our world, desperately in need of physical support and help and in need of a little kindness

and compassion.

There is the verse from Matthew's gospel, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? The answer - "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

We can show compassion in the way we deal with individuals we meet. We can also show compassion by supporting Christian Aid and other charities helping people in the third world. We cannot of course respond to them all.

Compassion is a depth of feeling. We can brush away feelings, gloss over them, or we can open ourselves up to gain more understanding of the other person – who in the eyes of God is always our neighbour no matter who they are.

We can do good deeds out of a sense of duty, but love and compassion is much more than that – it is a natural feeling. Jesus showed compassion to the woman in the synagogue. He shows us compassion in the forgiveness and mercy he promises when we admit our sins and failings – like the mercy the Russian women showed to the suffering German foot soldiers.

By putting the welfare of others before ourselves and doing so in a feeling of true compassion – doing unto others as we would like done to us – we are thus acting out God's love.

We are the body of the church – God's presence on earth. What an immense privilege – what an awesome thing. God loves each one of us individually and we can actively seek to love our neighbour, showing compassion just as Jesus did – and not pass by on the other side.

Amen

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