

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 19 JULY 2009
Rev. Vladimir Korotkov
Ephesians 2: 11-22; Mark 6: 30-44, 53-56

"Compassion as Empowerment"

Winter Humour

Two little boys, 8 and 10, were always getting into trouble. If any mischief happened in town, the two boys were probably involved.

The boy's mother heard that a preacher in town had great success in disciplining children, so she asked him if he would speak to her boys.

The preacher agreed and asked to see each individually, the 8-year-old in the morning, the older one in the afternoon.

Do you know where God is son? the preacher asked.

The boy's mouth dropped open, and he made no response, and just sat wide-eyed.

So the preacher repeated the question in an even sterner voice: Where is God?

Again, the petrified boy made no response.

The preacher raised his voice even more and shook his finger at the boy demanding, Where is God?

The boy screamed and bolted from the room, ran directly to his house and hid in a cupboard.

When his brother found him after a while, he asked, What happened?

The younger brother gasping for breath replied,

We are in BIG trouble this time!

GOD is missing and they think we did it!

(Shared by Chris McCallum, Nick McCallum's son)

Compassion as empowerment

"So they all stood, each praying to be ferried across first
their hands stretched out in longing for the further shore.

Then aroused and amazed by the disorder, Aeneas cries:
'Tell me, maiden, what means the crowding to the river?'

... To him thus briefly spoke the aged priestess:

... All this crowd that you see is helpless and graveless;"

Virgil, Aeneid VI, 313, 317

"A single beat from the heart of a lover is capable of driving out a hundred sorrows."

Naguib Mahfouz, Egyptian novelist

Compassion is learnt in engagement with the other

The disciples have just returned from a period of visiting diverse communities, and staying in people's home. Jesus had sent them to be in mission, to meet people, to listen to them, to support them in their needs and offer them the encouragement of God's love and concern for them.

The first implicit indication of the compassion of Jesus in our reading today emerges here, when Jesus senses their compassion fatigue. Come away and rest a while, he tells them. The followers of Jesus are mostly skilled trades people. They have just experienced engagement with people from different social, economic, and class contexts, many of them probably were poor. Engaging in pluralism, in difference, is tiring. And it takes a few years to become a multicultural person. Every meeting with others involves identifying with them, yet always involves merging. This merging tends "toward a unity of self and other that erases the difference and threatens the perception of the other as other" (Jean Wyatt, *Risking Difference: Identification, race and community*, 170). After being with people who are different for a while we come to think and believe we understand them, but we only confuse their perspective with ours.

Have they really learnt what hunger and unjust social and economic policies do to the poor? How it destroys their body, spirit mind and relationships? The disciples tell Jesus to **send the hungry people away** at the end of the day, after the great crowd have been with Jesus for the day. Jesus, our story tells us, is moved with a gut wrenching compassion when he sees them. They don't really see them, yet have just told Jesus they have loved and cared for the people they met.

Alicja Iwanska, in her cultural anthropological study of a group of white middle class suburbanites living in northwestern USA in the late 1970s found that they divided people of various cultures into three spaces or categories. They classified certain people as **scenery**: strangers, the most distant space, such as American Indian people. Reservations were visited as they would visit a zoo. The second category was **machinery**: these were the workers, Mexican migrant workers, valued for manual labour, and sent away when they were no longer useful. The third category was **people**: friends, family and those with similar cultural and socio-economic backgrounds were accepted as people. Iwanska's disturbing study shows that not all people are seen as human beings.

This is our reality, but is not shared to heap blame and raise guilt. Rather it invites us to create meeting spaces in which we all deeply listen, realising I may be looking from my perspective, and learning to understand life from your point of view

Compassion feeds the hunger of belonging

Compassion understands the hunger to belong. When the disciples tell Jesus to send THEM away to buy food elsewhere, they have not grasped the depth and desires of the hunger of the human spirit. For the disciples, the crowd is just THEM! Jesus' compassion, on the other hand, sees them as they are, lost, leaderless, and desperate, and also hungering for someone to lead them into real community.

As John O'Donohue has written:

Why do we need to belong?

Why is this desire so deeply rooted in every heart? The longing seems to be ancient and is at the core of our nature. Though you may often feel isolated, it is the nature of the soul to belong. The soul can never be separate; its eternal dream is intimacy and belonging. When we are rejected or excluded, we become deeply wounded. To be forced out, to be pushed to the margin hurts us. ... The most beautiful image in all religion is heaven or nirvana: the place of total belonging, where there is no separation or exclusion any more.

... The shelter of belonging empowers you... You are able to endure external pressure and confusion. You are sure of the ground on which you stand.

John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring our hunger to belong*, 5-8

I would suggest that this was the challenge for the church of Mark's time.

Compassion leads to empowerment

Compassion involves empowering people to build community and to draw on their resources to change their conditions. Otherwise, compassion remains mired in feelings of love for others that only makes us feel better. It creates dependency. It produces further powerlessness and misery for those we say we assist.

Compassion understands the nature of power and participates in its best expression. When the disciples say to Jesus, send them away to get their own food somewhere else, Jesus says, You give them something to eat. They become annoyed and say their resources are limited! They are suggesting they are powerless!

Jesus recognises their powerlessness. He seeks to empower them and the great crowd who are surrounding them. He sends them out among the people. Go and see what resources we have amongst us. They find enough food to feed everyone. What we have here is community organising in practice.

Ched Myers notes that there was nothing supernatural about this feeding of five thousand people. "The only 'miracle' here is the triumph of the economics of sharing..." (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 206). This sharing with the assembled people is in stark contrast to the contemporary economics and politics of food, "to the conflicts over hunger, tithing and the distribution of the fruit of the land" (Ched Myers, 207).

In our story there are allusions to Ezekiel 34, where some hundreds of years earlier the prophet was criticising the ruling class:

Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. ... With force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered ... and they became food for all wild beasts. (Ez: 2ff).

Michael Gecan, in his book on community organising, writes that power is everywhere. It was all around him when he was growing up in Chicago in the 1950s. There is the power of

the mob, the police, the council, ethnic gangs. The power of councils, parties. There was the much more complicated power of large institutions: the Catholic Church (Michael Gecan, *Going Public, preface*). There was the power of multi-ethnic (Croats, Germans, Italians, Czechs) real estate hustlers: panicking white families to sell property and leave because of the impending flood of African-American buyers, buying cheaply from these poor white families, selling expensively to black families desiring a better and safer life for their children. Then they bankrupted black and Hispanic buyers unable to meet payments and steered them into new ghettos. (Gecan, xxii)

My mother went to the pastor and described all this. He nodded and said he would get back to her. He never did.

My mother's action ... was about using power. The attempt to defend her family and to enlist other families ... to research an issue and understand it, to take research and analysis to a place where she thought her work would be welcome... this in a positive spirit... and related as openly to our new black neighbours as to our fleeing white friends. Deeply disappointed by the inaction of the pastor, she didn't use that disappointment as a reason to retreat from all the public matters or to reject her local parish or her larger church. (xiii)

Gecan understood what Jesus understood in his time. That all institutions and communities drift. "And that organising, participating and acting are essential to the health of your own institutions, your own congregation of faith, your own political party or union, own associations..." (xiii).

Compassion is grace, kindness and mercy

Compassion is about power when it is filled with love for others and oneself; it lives from that deep sense of belonging with family, friends and community; and is made greatly alive by the grace, mercy and kindness of God who deeply loves all humanity (Ephesians 2: 11-22). This is the compassion of Jesus!

It never sends us away, it never dumps or destroys us, as human beings destroy each other. It aches and holds the murdered, dumped people like the renowned Chechen activist Natalya Estemirova, who exposed abuses in the troubled region of Chechnya and was abducted and murdered on Wednesday.

Christ calls us to "Go and See" how and where we can express our compassion.