

3 August 2014. **Romans 9:1-5 and Matthew 14:13-21**

Compassion and Love

I don't suppose many of you lie awake at night and wonder about the workings of the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England. No, neither do I. But, even if it doesn't keep me from sleeping, I do sometimes wonder about what gets left out of our readings and why sometimes a passage, like this morning's gospel, has a bit of mystery attached to it.

Just what was it that Jesus had heard that caused him to want to withdraw?

He had just been told about the execution, the horrific beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus wants time alone, time when he would probably have wanted to pray, to mourn his cousin, to reflect on the way in which his own ministry will be affected by it – moving into a time of increased antagonism from those in power. And he doesn't get it. He is literally crowded out. For, once the crowds also heard the news, in their distress, they sought him out.

Faced with the needs of others, I find I can often weigh up two options. There's the 'I want to be alone' Greta Garbo approach. Put out a sort of force field, don't come near me, I'm far too busy or tired to be able to deal with you now. And there's the ok, I can do this, shoulders back, head up and smile, ignore my own feelings sort of approach.

Jesus takes a third route. We are told that Jesus had compassion for the crowd. Compassion – it's much deeper than gritting your teeth and putting on a smile to get you through. It's the emotion you feel in response to the sufferings of others that motivates a desire to help. It's that instinctive love that gives time and energy to a problem; that really properly listens to another's distress; that sees a need and responds. And Jesus had compassion on the crowd, which moved him to attend to their needs above his own. And perhaps in so doing, received in return some comfort for his own distress.

I wonder how many people that Jesus sought to heal that day said to him, 'no, I'm fine, doing all right really, I'll weather this bit of bad news, I'm strong enough'. I wonder how many of us say that to Jesus today. Because you know, the compassion that Jesus showed 2,000 years ago, he still wants to show today. How many of us build a protective layer around ourselves? Yes, no one wants to be emotionally incontinent. But neither do we want to go to the other extreme. I came across this quotation from C.S. Lewis while reading around the subject of compassion and love:

'To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable'.¹

¹ C.S. Lewis – Four Loves – found in Timothy Radcliffe: What is the Point of Being a Christian?

Jesus wants to break into the barriers we put around us to protect ourselves. He wants to bring light and air into the casket into which we have placed our deepest needs and desires. And he does that through those we worship alongside, work alongside, live alongside.

Have a look at the disciples in this passage. Jesus's approach to service is beginning to rub off on them. They see him caring for others and they would like to help too. But Jesus rejects their suggestion that the crowd is sent away before it becomes too hungry. Instead Jesus takes their suggestion that food is needed and helps them to find the solution. He takes their initial idea and works with them to turn it into something much bigger than they had expected.

Jesus does that with us too.

Jesus takes all that we offer him, our ideas, our money, our artistic talents, voices, brains, physical strength and our vulnerabilities. He offers them in prayer to the Father, blesses them and returns them to us, broken open and ready to be used in his service. So that they can be used by those who need them.

Sometimes we will be the ones who will attend to another's need. We will be the one who will sit alongside another who is grieving, we will provide tea and sympathy or a quiet space. Or we will support from more of a distance with prayer. Other times we will have to be ready to let down our guard enough to receive that love and support from another. For often we cannot see our own need for care. Life delivers much that we cannot deal with ourselves. The Holy Spirit is an amazing comforter and companion, but I also believe that the work of the Spirit is often done by human hands.

May we be moved to be compassionate towards each other, and may we too be willing to receive care from others.

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