



Compassion
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Year B, Ordinary 16
Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Mark 6: 30-34,53-56
21 July 2024

Mark opens with Jesus gathering the apostles who've been out on a mission. Jesus and the apostles are exhausted. So, in keeping with good self-care, they're intending to take some time out. To recharge, be still, be filled. Then, before you know it, people in need besiege them. Jesus' response is to turn to those in need, to bear and bring the healing and wholeness they seek. Not sure this is a passage that would be utilized in the Boundaries training course as an example that models safe boundaries!

We hear people are in desperate need of healing. They press and push and rush and hurry. They race ahead to get to Jesus and the apostles before they've even arrived at the next destination. Desperation to be healed, to have the One fix all their problems and those of their loved ones. And Jesus and his closest followers are going about doing just that. People ask and they receive, even though the need seems overwhelming, and Jesus and his apostles are exhausted.

As it happens the lectionary readings for today omit two intervening stories: the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' walking on water. And it bothers me, it's to do with upcoming lectionary readings, but even so.

In the feeding of the five thousand the resources needed to fulfil the need, the hunger of those gathered, upon whom Jesus had compassion, were found within the people gathered. From this resourcefulness, abundance more than sufficient to meet need was enabled.

In the Jesus walking on water story, the disciples are making their way, rowing hard into the weather, slow but steady. Shock and fear arise when

they see Jesus' walking on water, not because they needed the storm stilled. Sure, once Jesus decides to hitch a ride the storm eases, but that's not what's sought by them.

Both these passages suggest to me the capacity to fulfil the need in their midst lies within the people that come. It may need to be pointed out but it lies there. To omit these two stories means we hear the gospel today as one of desperation and of dependency. It's this that bothers me.

Having got that off my chest, let's look to see what Mark would have us learn of Jesus. For how we understand Jesus, who we've come to discern as God presence, informs our understanding of God within the world and in us. And **how** we understand God, influences what we do, how we live, our attitude and impetus toward our world.

What we hear today is Jesus, in face of desperate clamouring crowds seeking healing, responding with compassion, literally 'with suffering.' In our day and age, Douglas John Hall suggests "most of us don't hear compassion in this literal sense." "We think it a synonym for pity. Pity is something you can manage from afar. ... Not compassion. You do not have compassion ... unless you *suffer with* those to whom you refer."¹ In the gospel today, Jesus embodies compassion literally. He identifies with those who've come to him without condescension and without pity.

It made me think of some recent rhetoric in our political landscape. The words of a certain minister when talking about shoebox apartments, suggesting they were a step up from tents and cars, so those who got them should be grateful. I wonder if that minister considered actually living in one himself? That literal compassion thing. Do you think, as a sound way to save money, that shoebox apartments could become a suitable provision of accommodation for said leaders? I wonder if that might influence decision making.

How **is** compassion most commonly expressed today? As Christianity evolved in the West, perhaps especially the 'missional spread' Christianity

¹David Lyon Bartlett. (2015). *Feasting on the word. Year B, volume 3, Pentecost and season after Pentecost 1 (prophets 3-16)*. Westminster John Knox Press, 262.

evolved, it not surprisingly, came to be expressed through the culture in which it was embedded. Replete with colonising intentions and capitalist underpinnings. We can understand how such influence might lead to compassion becoming distanced from its literal meaning roots. For compassion to be expressed and provided through charitable agencies, commodified for efficiency, you might say. This isn't to suggest this is wrong or bad. Simply an effective means by which those with more, could trust the giving from their abundance to those in need, into the hands of those who knew about these things.

Over time the charitable industry has flourished. If you don't look too closely, a good and generous thing is done by this. Out of good intention, aware of our blessings, we want to share, fulfil our responsibility and obligation to care. However, it's a way of caring that keeps us at arms distance from those we give to. Paradoxically turning "'charity' into an entirely self-indulgent affair, in which the only thing that matters to the giver *is the knowledge that they have given*, rather than any knowledge of the recipient or the witnessing of the effects of their action."²

I wonder how deeply we've considered the potential impact of our 'compassion as charity' giving? Tweaked by the selected gospel passages and the hint of dependency, I was intrigued by Robert Lupton's reflection, "The compassion industry is almost universally accepted as a virtuous and constructive enterprise. ... Yet those closest to the ground ... quietly admit that it may be hurting more than helping. How? Dependency, destroying personal initiative. When we do for those in need what they have the capacity to do for themselves, we disempower them."³

Jesus' compassion today is intimate and immediate. A travel weary, grubby, besieged Jesus sees the desperate, needy and disordered people who've flocked to him and chooses to open himself, to risk compassion. To risk experiencing the pain and suffering and desperate need of those who jostle

² http://becomingnoble.substack.com/p/is-your-charity-going-to-waste?utm_source=publication-search

³ Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How To Reverse It)*

and shove and push – his neighbours. No arm's length safety, theoretically doing good to someone over there. This is about the people we bang up against, we know, or can know and could love, if we were willing to risk it. Confronting? Uncomfortable? Goodness me, surely this isn't expected of us?

Such blatant show of desperation's a bit off, all a bit unrestrained and unsettling for those of us who prefer good order. To experience someone whose needs are so raw and on display, worn on the outside, is all rather repellent. However, our reaction of distaste and discomfort could give us pause to reflect. The discomfort of that desperate worn on the outside need for healing, may be this way for us because it's not too far from our experience. Our covered over hidden inside need for healing and wholeness, the distaste and discomfort we experience in part because of our own inner sharp and broken pieces?

I don't think we're asked to assume the burden of the need of our neighbour, as if we've responsibility to fix it. I do wonder if we're asked to be willing to stay, stand with, hear, respect learn and, in mutual relationship, contribute to bring about change as it is needed, as it is appropriate. To be literally compassionate, from which mutual healing can flow.