

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

John Morgan

Deuteronomy 24: 17-22

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Gospel

Matthew 9: 35-38

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he 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."

Contemporary reading

First stanza of *The Charter of Compassion*

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

Reflection

Our focus this month on Compassion came about because I was looking around for why we do our social justice emphasis here in the church. What, I wondered, is our mandate for working so this world is just and fair and at peace all at the same time? I wondered why Jesus helped the people he helped. And I thought of the Judeo Christian underpinning to their law where those who were helpless and homeless and vulnerable were the object of instructions to farmers and vineyard owners. We often say that we are New Testament people, following the way of Jesus rather than cluttering ourselves up with a lot of religious rules, but thousands of years before Jesus' time, the Jewish people devised rules for looking after the most vulnerable in the land – the foreigners, the orphans and the widows. Migrants, orphan children and solo mums – the ones in Jewish society who did not have the usual protections of land in the case of foreigners, or the protection of a father or husband in the case of the orphans and widows. Orphans are called fatherless here because even if you had a solo mum, she couldn't provide for you in that patriarchal society. She had no status and no land on which to grow crops and feed the family.

So instructions were given that the usual custom of taking a cloak as a pledge on a loan was not to be used for a widow – she was to be left the warmth of her cloak. And if a sheaf of grain was left behind they were not to go back and get it but leave it for the foreigner the fatherless and the widow – and here we remember the story of Ruth gleaning in the foreign fields near Bethlehem for just such leavings. The olive trees were to be beaten only once to make the olives fall and the harvesting was a once over and leave the pickings for those vulnerable people in society. Today we might say leave them for the homeless, the drug addict and the beneficiaries on stand down. Notice though the reason given for the kindness of sloppy harvesting – it was in memory of the origins of the Jewish people – once they were slaves in Egypt, centuries before and they were delivered. They need to act with mercy because of that racial memory

So Jesus is in a long tradition of compassion being shown to those in need. He didn't just burst on to the world like a supernovae of compassion, he had been steeped in such traditions. Each harvest festival his family would have brought their gifts to the synagogue and temple reciting the incantation of Deuteronomy 26. *"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. ⁶ But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. ⁷ Then we cried out..."* those making offerings reminding themselves and the community that they had been delivered themselves from bondage and pain.

These ancient passages set an important precedent. Our compassionate and charitable acts are more authentic and real if they spring from our own realisation of our own vulnerability or past deliverance for which we are grateful ourselves; or if we have been privileged to glimpse the raw need in a beneficiaries life, or the agony of someone living in a war zone or the dislocated feeling a refugee experiences. Jesus, the one we follow, helped the crowds because when he saw their need he was moved with compassion because *they were harassed and helpless, like people without a shepherd*. Remember Jesus himself was once a refugee – we don't know what age he was when his family returned from Egypt, but he has his own story of dislocation and exile in his family narrative.

As the cover of the order of service indicates, the Hebrew word *racham* (rah-chem) is the root word for 'mercy' and 'compassion' but also for 'womb'. This means that when Jesus was moved with compassion it was a gut wrenching experience. He was moved in his very inner being, his insides contracting with compassion, like a woman in labour, he felt the people's pain. Like his forebears remembering the ancient stories of the exile in Egypt, he perhaps remembering also being exiled in Egypt, his compassion was deep and inward and gutsy. We all know men don't usually physically have wombs, but in this case I think we can posit a metaphorical womb which has its place in **all** our inward beings. It is a Womb of Life out of which springs compassion and mercy and tender lovingkindness, in each of us it is **The** Womb of Life out of which springs Life in all its fullness and Compassion in all its beauty.

The best kind of help for those who live unjust lives is when it comes from someone who understands their situation. Which brings me to Edna Kerr. Edna's been dead a long time now but she was my Sunday school teacher when I was 12. I loved her lessons. She had done some bible training and she taught us well. Sometimes I think despite theological training that all I know about the Bible I learned in Sunday School and Bible Class. When Maata Morrell joined us from the North Island, Edna was determined that our item in the Sunday school concert would be Maori songs that year. I don't know whether Maata contributed the words and music or if Edna researched them, but however it happened, in the 1960s in Gore this was no mean feat. She also arranged costumes for us (I don't know where she got them from!). Except - I was already more than regular size. My mother told me later that Edna had said to her that she was determined to get me a costume – and she managed it – not quite like the other girls' but close enough for me to be prepared to participate. I look back and wonder what experiences in Edna's life led her to be bothered to make the effort to be compassionate towards a Maori girl from the North Island finding herself in Southland, and equally compassionate towards a pakeha girl with a weight problem. It wasn't a 'there, there' and a pat on the head. It wasn't hands-off charity. It was a compassionate putting herself out because she knew it mattered.

The first stanza of the Charter of Compassion emphasises that true compassion involves the dethroning *of ourselves from the centre of our world*. In the compassionate moment it is *the other* in need who should become the centre of our world. When we put them there we look at their situation not our own, we notice what it really is that can be addressed, we see with new eyes what might be the problem.

So, if our compassion takes the form of us letting everyone know we've made a donation, or us going public with how helpful we have been, or naming the lengths we have gone to, it's not **real** compassion because real compassion isn't about us, it's about the other. In that moment we are not important. In other moments we will be important – that's really necessary, but in the moment of the act or acts of compassion we are not the centre of attention.

And when it **is** about the other, and comes from our very guts, from the Womb of Life inside us, then we will find ourselves honouring, (as the Charter calls us to), honouring *the inviolable sanctity of every single human being*.

And as the Charter also reminds us, true compassion, springing from the depths of the Womb of Life, results in everyone being treated *without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect*.

So may it be.