

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 10 June 2018 Pentecost 3

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible **God's Compassion Despite Israel's Ingratitude** **Hosea 11: 1-4**

11 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called them. 2 The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. 3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

Gospel **Love for Enemies** **Matthew 5:43-48**

43 "You have heard that it was said, " You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of the divine parent who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be complete and whole, therefore, as your divine parent is complete.

Contemporary reading 2nd stanza from *The Compassion Charter* Inspired by Karen Armstrong

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

Reflection

Many of you will be aware that we frequently put a false front forward to other people. You know this because you do it yourself. Outwardly we show it by having at-home clothes which are older and more paint stained and worn at the cuffs and neck. We are happy to wear them at home as long as a stranger or a guest does not catch us in them. Because, when we leave the house in many different ways, including changing our clothes, we get ready to meet others.

We might shower and wash, some of us might shave others trim our facial hair, we might put on makeup, and, most of us put on something different – clothes which are tidier, more professional, less restricting, more sparkly, whatever, depending on our destination. (Just the other day I was reflecting on the penalty of being given a Queen's Honour. With that distinction one is often asked to speak at or attend grand occasions – but does a clothing allowance come with the honour? I don't think so!)

Along with the clothing, make up or lack of it, shaving or lack of it, we put in place a psychological persona – a mask if you will – which presents to the world our public face. Usually this public face is confident, smiling, professional, and helps people think we are happy and at ease. This public face protects our inner selves which might be less at ease and more vulnerable. Everybody does it and we expect it of ourselves and of others. It smoothes the way for social interaction.

This weekend, foodies and those who follow travel writers, are mourning the suicide of Anthony Bourdain – chef, author, storyteller and CNN travel presenter. The CNN community is in shock and ran several commentaries in their news programmes on Friday, showing Anthony in his programmes and posing after film festivals or award shows. I looked carefully at his face – it was generally arranged pleasantly in a persona like mask - but in latter pictures, from behind that almost-smiling face, I don't think it was my imagination in hindsight, that his eyes looked sad, blank and empty.

If you had asked me to list confident chefs, he might have been on my list along with Gordon Ramsey, Jamie Oliver, Nigella Lawson, Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood. To me he was the sort of person who appeared to have it all – money (I assume), good looks, great skills, an urbanity that made everything look easy. He had a fascinating job for which he was in France (in the middle of filming future episodes for an upcoming series.) But in the pictures shown this weekend, Bourdain’s smile wasn’t reaching his eyes. If you link his suicide with Shakespeare’s observation that – “the eyes are the window of the soul” – then we can assume Anthony Bourdain’s soul was deeply unhappy. We, the general public, might find out why, but probably not, and anyway, that is his private business.

I quote this tragic happening to illustrate how even the people we think are most confident, may in fact be fragile inside. We can therefore cause pain to others more easily than we think. Even those whom we most hate for their politics or their actions, are human. “We bleed on all sides”, even those of us who seem *not* to have the warmth of human kindness running in their veins.

I remember as a teacher relieving for another teacher’s maths class, trying to make an impression on a 16 year old school student who towered above me as I told him off for his behaviour. Seeking all the ammunition I could find as he listened to me with what seemed like an uncaring smirk on his face, I referred (negatively) to his height. I could tell at once I had hit a sensitive spot. Suddenly the annoyance I had felt at his behaviour melted away – it was now a hurt little boy in front of me and the hurt well out-weighed some irritating classroom behaviour.

To avoid causing pain while still correcting behaviour required more skill and compassion than I was applying in that moment. The combative behaviour we see modelled at question time in Parliament or the argumentative television commentaries we see on our news, or the undiplomatic diplomacy we are watching around the world at the moment, or the cut and thrust of electioneering rhetoric hardly prepare us, as the Charter calls us to, for ‘consistently and empathetically refraining from inflicting pain.’

In our schools and churches and training institutions of all sorts, within our families, we need help in dealing with each other so that wrongs can be righted and good done; fraud and dishonesty and injustice can be called out, but in such a way that personal private pain is not inflicted. The 16 year old boy needed to be challenged but I had used the wrong tools to do so. Not surprising, as in the 1970s when I trained as a teacher, win-win methods of discipline in schools were not being taught. They were certainly not modelled in the school in which I was teaching at the time which was much the same as it had been in the ‘60s when I was a student there.

Our General Assemblies in our own church are not models of pain-free debate, though one breakthrough Margaret Mayman was able to achieve was moderation of the language used in the debates over homosexuality and the Church. It was a landmark moment when she and Stuart Lange, from the opposition, came before Assembly with an agreement they and others had devised about how we would speak about each other in the debate. What a pity that was needed, but how good that this ‘deal’, so to speak, happened.

We can look at this aspect of showing compassion on the level of one to one interaction, or within small groups or within nationwide organisations like national Church Assemblies, or internationally between nation states. At each level, having an empathetic view of the other before you is the key to being able to show them compassion. Even our enemies are human beings deserving of respect and dignity, believe it or not. Even psycho- and socio-paths are dealt with better when someone seeks to understand how they operate and what might be driving them; what emotions are missing from their repertoire and how therefore they can be stopped rather than their behaviour inflamed and further provoked.

Empathy is different from sympathy. When we feel sympathy for another we feel emotions such as compassion, sorry or pity for them in the hardships they are encountering. When we feel empathy for someone, we put ourselves in their shoes – “walk a mile in their moccasins” is another way of putting it - and look at the situation from their point of view. When we put ourselves on their side, looking through their eyes, then it is more difficult to choose a response that would inflict further pain.

There are plenty of people in this world at whom I would like to lash out, to inflict pain on them for the pain they have caused others – human traffickers, crooked immigration agents, rapists, deliberately neglectful parents, arms manufacturers are just a few – if I go on I’ll begin to sound like a ring-in on an all-night talk back show! But even if I were in the position to lash out at these groups, I am not convinced that would solve either my problem or theirs or the problems of those they have harmed.

It requires massive cooperation to begin to achieve win-win solutions where we can so that compassion can operate in our world.

It’s a bit like driving in traffic. When you are keen to get somewhere the last thing you want to do is let another driver into the flow of traffic in which you have finally found a place. You are sure you will be made later for your meeting and you think at first that you can’t afford to be generous and give way. But, I have observed, that letting in that person there, and this one other here and another one up front, helps everyone. The traffic flows more smoothly, more people get through in a given time and, most importantly, everyone relaxes a little, feels a little better about themselves, about that gnarly commute and about their day.

And we need to find strong but compassionate ways to confront those who are exploiting and abusing, who are chauvinistic and prejudiced, and those who incite hatred. We need to be resolute, but not use the same tools back, for then we would have made little progress as a human race.

No one said showing compassion would be easy – it must be the most difficult thing on the planet. If it were easy and it didn’t mean we have to give a little, then some more and then even more still, we would have got this sorted a long time ago.

I hope you were shocked by the Hosea passage. In the world view of Hosea’s time, God was male. In that world, loving an infant, leading them by the hand and lifting them to the cheek was women’s work. Yet Israel’s Almighty God here is pictured as saying *he* has voluntarily taken what would have been regarded as an inferior role, willing, despite the nation’s waywardness to carry on nurturing and caring and loving. Sounds powerfully like a role model of compassion to me.

And, Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel, shocks his audience too by advocating that they not only love those they like and get on with – for anyone can do that, he says - but that we *love* those who are our enemies and *pray* for those who persecute us. It is a high standard which many of us will not achieve in our lifetime.

Some of you may have recognised the shift in translation used in that passage. We are used to hearing “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect”. The word usually translated perfect can also mean ‘complete’. A complete person is one who has reached an integrated position – one where they can admit their own wrongs and inadequacies and failures and so can be empathetic towards the other. They are therefore thus enabled to be truly compassionate even when the temptation just to let rip is strong and deep. Let us aim then, as much as we humanly can, to be compassionately complete and completely compassionate.