

St Andrew's on the terrace Sunday 24 June Pentecost 5 4th reflection on Compassion

Readings for the Gathering

2 Kings 5 : 1-14 Naaman Healed of Leprosy

5 Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. 2 Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4 Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. 5 "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left,.... 6 The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." 7 As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" 8 When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." 9 So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." 11 But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

13 Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" 14 So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Luke 10:25-37 The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" 27 He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'^[a]; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'^[b]" 28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" 30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" 37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had compassion for him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Contemporary reading '4th stanza of the Charter of Compassion' Inspired by Karen Armstrong

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is

essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

Reflection

It is as if the Charter for Compassion is a multifaceted diamond. Over these four weeks we have had it in our jeweller's tweezers; twisting and turning it to get every flash of light, every beam of brilliance from its many faces. This is our fourth turn of the gem.

It's a pity more of you could not make it to the SATRS seminar this weekend. Not only are you the poorer for having missed a dazzling list of speakers. I could have passed up doing a reflection today and left the memory of Friday night and Saturday to finish this series!

The theme of the fourth stanza of the Charter takes an international theme. We are urged to look beyond our small patch here, to the world. We are urged to use compassion in its many forms to break down barriers between peoples and nations and between different creeds and politics. I chose the two Bible readings today with that in mind.

Naaman of the Hebrew Bible narrative is not an Israelite but the highest ranking general in the kingdom of Aram. Aram is a biblical name for the territory where modern day Syria is located. So this *Syrian* general is advised by a captured Israel slave girl to go for a health consultation to a Samaritan prophet across the border. Can you imagine a North Korean general being advised by a captured South Korean maid to cross the border and consult a physician in her country across the Demilitarized Zone? Can you imagine Kim Jong Oon agreeing to this idea?

Then imagine said general turning up in the palace of the South Korean president saying he had been sent by his leader to consult for a cure. Imagine the trepidation of the South Korean president when he contemplates telling Kim Jong Oon he cannot cure his general.. "see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" Indeed!

But, a nearby South Korean consultant in skin lesions sends a message that he may be able to help. International crisis is averted through two acts of compassion by lowly members of society. But there's more....Naaman takes offence at the water cure prescribed. He would have stomped off home in a military huff. But, his servant braves his anger and suggests Naaman might have done what the prophet said were it noble and brave, so why not give this treatment a try? [This does suggest both Naaman and his wife were a good couple to work for, if two of their workers dared to speak up in such a way to help cure their master – perhaps the compassion in this tale began with them?]

The ability to do something different, to break through political, religious and territorial barriers suggests compassion is at work here.

Likewise, the famous story of the Good Samaritan a story more readily associated with compassion. After three fellow Jews had ignored the man lying by the side of the road, the Samaritan takes pity on the mugging victim even though the man left for dead is his enemy. Samaritans were Jews too, but they belonged to the remnant left behind in Israel centuries ago when the bulk of the nation was deported to Assyria. When exiled Israelites returned they found the Samaritans, having intermingled with other peoples placed there by Assyrians, had developed a different worship and beliefs. This act of compassion for a mugging victim is one which crosses centuries-old boundaries of hatred and prejudice and vilification.

In both these stories, compassion is a "clear, luminous and dynamic force in a polarized world" as the fourth stanza urges. The Charter calls us to make sure that compassion is that same force for good in our own fractured and dislocated spaces

In this stanza of the Charter, we are called to **decided, intentional** action; that our compassionate moments should be rooted in “a **principled determination** to transcend selfishness”.

Before we nod sagely and agree that of course we should transcend selfishness, let's make sure we really know what we mean when we talk of selfishness. Wikipedia has it:

*Selfishness is being concerned excessively or exclusively, for oneself or one's own advantage, pleasure, or welfare, regardless of others. Selfishness is the opposite of [altruism] or selflessness; and has also been contrasted (as by C. S. Lewis) with self-centeredness.*¹

Notice the words in this definition; being concerned ‘excessively’ or ‘exclusively’ for ourselves. A selfish person has only room for one person in their life – themselves. This is not a temporary condition, but a habitual orientation. Everything relates to them and is about them.

Contrast this with self-care and self-affirmation which we now know to be healthier than always putting others first. True compassion or altruism does not require us to rid our lives of any consideration of ourselves. It does not ask us to **only** live for others. That is the way of burnout, resentment and martyrdom.

Those of you who follow the e news will know last Sunday's reflection where the acronym JOY – Jesus first, others next, and yourself last - was mentioned as a dangerous and misleading exhortation became a topic of conversation at cuppa and chat. Many of us have been told that to look after ourselves, to treat ourselves, or choose to do something for us rather than in that moment for another is to be selfish. The meaning in the selfishness definition however, is that selfishness is a *prolonged* and *exclusive* focusing on the self, not a considered alternating of self-care with care-of-the-other.

You can tell me of many people, some of whom we call saints and some of whom have been canonised saints, who seem to have always put others first. I would like to know more of those people. Whether they were able to, in their hearts, keep giving gladly and freely with real joy, or whether, as the years wore on, resentment and martyrdom weighed heavy. Did they in the end need to start acting out a saintly demeanour rather than gladly giving from a cup they had made sure was always full.

Some personalities and people with long training in the care of others do habitually put others first. They then mysteriously find the joy is slipping out of their lives, they are always fatigued and behind the scenes their grumbling and resentment grows. They always eat the broken egg, they are the ones who eat up the last dry leftovers, they take the draughty seat, they **always** add taking someone home after an already long and tiring day, they run themselves short of money in order to be always charitable. None of these things are all bad, but become ‘all bad’ when you do them all the time.

And as these rescuers, martyrs and messiahs help or insist on helping, something goes wrong with that helping relationship. For instance, they insist on always paying – never allowing the other to take a turn. And the so-called gift of a meal or a trip loses some of the joy and surprise or sense of care for another; it becomes almost a chore for the receiver to accept; it turns into a message to the receiver that they are the losers in this relationship, unable to afford the treat even occasionally basis. More, the receiver is robbed of the chance to be a giver from time to time and the eternal giver never gets the joy of being given anything.

Suddenly it seems, this so-called selflessness and these so-called acts of compassionate build up a dark and deadly sense of obligation and control. In some settings what seems like selflessness can actually be selfishness in another guise where the giver always has to selfishly be The One.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selfishness>

Just because we have been trained over the years to quickly jump to be helpful, we need to not confuse familiarity with the right thing to do. Because you have always done it, doesn't mean you always should.

How do we know when compassion is being done right? There's a hallmark of a truly compassionate exchange. The person being helped feels loved and valued, maybe surprised and pleased. The person helping generally feels little sense of burden or resentment. Each can tell the other "No". The helper does not always need to be known to the other. The one being helped feels good about the fact that if they want to pay back they can at another time, but also, they can pay it forward; or, also, do nothing in return but just enjoy the gift.

This does not mean that we will always *want* to be compassionate. Some acts of compassionate are hard and difficult. We will not always *feel* compassionate as we carry out that compassionate act. We will need that principled determination that we will be truly compassionate people and we *will* act that way to all people – those we think are dodgy, those whom we like, those we might not know, those we think are not really in need, but would appreciate a boost, perhaps even we will dare to be compassionate to those we suspect don't deserve it at all.

The stanza reminds us we are interdependent – so we need to be inter-compassionate – compassionate to each other.

Be truly and healthily compassionate
for it is a divine thing to be merciful and loving
and
it makes our world a better place.

So may it be

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