

Pentecost 2A June 14 2020
Matthew 9:35-10:8
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace to you and peace from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had **compassion** for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." Let's pray:*

Saints, it's a great injustice that this beautiful insight into Jesus' character is so readily hijacked and weaponised. Most people have been trained into recognising, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few." And because our flesh is held captive by the law, it's often used or received in a legalistic manner which leads to judgement, guilt, shame, and blame. Hence, my use of the terms "hijacked" and "weaponised." So, if this raises bad memories or feelings of being ear-bashed about doing your bit for the kingdom, relax, enjoy your cuppa' and let God's grace (and some warm blankets) comfort you.

From where I'm standing (in the pulpit), I don't see this well-worn statement as the verse that drives this passage. I'm always drawn to what Jesus sees and feels that evokes such calls to action. St Matthew tells us that Jesus travelled all over the place teaching and proclaiming the good news; curing disease and sickness, and as he did, he would take time to absorb everything that was going on around him: "When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had **compassion** for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

And there it is. Compassion. When we reflect on Jesus' life and ministry, the characteristic that stands out is his compassion. Compassion is what impelled him in all of his actions and calls to arms. Compassion lies at the heart of the gospel.

What you see below, is a marvellously framed painting created and presented to me by Shaun Astles. I'm humbled by Shaun's magnanimous gesture and inspired by his talent. Thank you, Shaun.

I'd like you to take a few moments to study it. A picture paints a thousand words as the saying goes. And it will inevitably draw different responses from different viewers. Go on, take a look.



Artist: Shaun Astles, June 2020.

In one word, this image screams “compassion” to me. Tears, especially from Jesus, immediately brings to mind, sadness and grief. Grief brought about by either the destruction or ignorance of humanity. Sadness that emanates from Jesus’ pure heart, driven by compassion and love for his harassed and helpless sheep. Compassion for the lost, dispirited, distressed, vexed, troubled, downcast, and oppressed. Compassion for you and I.

And when the scriptures say, “he had compassion for them,” it means a lot more than a mere feeling, thought, or good intention isolated from action. Compassion literally eats Jesus up inside, causes him pain, and spurs him into action, eliciting an explosion of love and healing [see also Jeremiah 31:20*].

Without dishonouring Shaun’s intended message portrayed in his wonderful painting, I’m immediately drawn to and captured by the tear falling from the corner of Jesus’ eye. A tear that began its long journey from Jesus’ heart on its way to pierce our hearts.

I say that, because compassion is “a literal sharing of affliction or suffering with another”; “a feeling of sorrow or pity excited by the sufferings or misfortunes of another” (com: with – passion: suffering). The tear draws us into Christ’s own suffering, and he into ours.

As Jesus gazed out at the people gathered about him, St Matthew says he was filled with compassion. Their pain, their loneliness, their grief, it all became his. He saw just how harassed and helpless they were. His response to their plight was loving compassion.

When Jesus feels compassion towards us, he senses the pain and hardship we’re experiencing. He literally puts himself in our shoes. Our trial becomes his trial. Our suffering becomes his suffering.

Compassion is the backbone of Jesus’ mission. It was compassion that compelled him to take on our human flesh in the first place. It was compassion that compelled him to give Abraham and Sarah a

son in their old age. And compassion prompted him to pour himself out to death on a cross “while we were still sinners.”

As servants of Christ, the church is compelled to be of the same mind as Christ (Philippians 2:5). The same inner perspective or heart as Christ. And throughout every generation, compassion has been the calling of Christ’s church. To paraphrase the German pastor, Jürgen Moltmann, “The church exists for Christ’s sake.” **

The church exists for Christ’s sake. As the church, Christ’s compassion is in our DNA. Just as Jesus was moved by compassion and acted from that compassion, we do too.

In each generation, the church has continued to respond to times of need with compassion. We are currently in the middle of such a time with the COVID-19 outbreak. Compassion calls to us. It calls us to respond with a servant’s heart.

And we see examples of servant hearts all around us. Each person responding according to their ability:

- Medical workers tirelessly treating patients
- Researchers working towards treatments and vaccines
- Premiers of each state working to do whatever is in their power to keep the public safe
- Truckies shipping vital goods from place to place
- Factory workers working extra shifts in order to meet the demand for goods
- Neighbours keeping track of one another
- Volunteers reaching out to feed the hungry and help the vulnerable
- People following practices to curtail the spread of the virus
- And Christians praying

A servant sees the needs of the neighbour. The welfare of our neighbour becomes our chief concern. We lose ourselves, as Jesus says (Mark 8:35). We lose ourselves, but we gain our neighbour. Oddly, this loss brings us back to ourselves. Not the same self - the self, transformed by the mind of Christ.

This self is driven by compassion. Compassion driven by love. Love driven by divine compulsion to give, share, save.

Yet, it's not only ability that enables us to serve. Availability is just as, if not more important. Jesus states the obvious, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few;" what he says next goes largely unnoticed. He doesn't say, "So get cracking you lot!" Jesus says, "ask [pray] the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest."

You may not know what abilities or gifts you possess, but everyone is available to pray. Please, never underestimate the power of prayer to transform the world.

The harvest is God's business; he chooses his own workers. And he chooses those he has prepared. Those ready for the task must wait for God's call, and he doesn't necessarily call all those who are ready. In Isaiah 6:8 the Lord says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And St Paul says to the Galatians, "But when God, who had set me apart *before I was born* and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me" (Galatians 1:15-16a).

Jesus himself waited. 'Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise"' (John 5:19). 'And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"' (Hebrews 5:4-5).

God will send out his labourers when and as he sees fit, according to his will and plan.

When I look around at the world and its needs, as I listen to your stories, your pain, your struggles, and I look deeply into the eyes of Jesus that Shaun has portrayed so honestly in his painting, I'm convinced that we don't need more spirit-crushing rules, guilt, shame, judgement, harassment, and distress, rather; we need massive doses

of God's compassion and mercy that flow like rivers from the corners of his tear-drenched eyes.

My dear, God-fearing and God-loving Saints, let's not weaponise scripture by using it to justify ourselves or judge others. Rather, let's hear the voice of our Shepherd, be consoled by his love and ministry to us, then, wait, watch, pray, and be ready to respond, whatever that might look like, with compassion. The world is hurting, Saints, so let's shed a tear, to God's glory. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

* "Is not Ephraim [Israel] my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him," declares the Lord.' *Therefore **my heart yearns for him** literally translates, Thus **My stomach churns for him**. Can you imagine, Saints? God cares so much for us that his stomach churns when he sees our plight and he responds with compassion/love/mercy.*

** 'Wherever there is Christ, there is the church. The church does not exist for herself. "Where this Christ makes himself present, the church comes into being and also exists. But this sentence cannot be turned the other way round." [1] The church exists for Christ and participates in the mission of Christ in the power of the Spirit. As Moltmann writes, "The church participates in Christ's messianic mission and in the creative mission of the Spirit." [2] The mission of the church derives from her relationship with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.' <http://discipleshipletter.blogspot.com/2013/11/jurgen-moltmann-church-missio-dei.html> accessed 04/06/2020.
