

Homily Pentecost 2 – Bishop Cam

Readings: Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7) Psalm 116:1-2, 11-18

Romans 5:1-11 Matthew 9:35 - 10:8 (9-23)

In response to all the tough stuff going on in the world we may each be wondering how on earth things are going to improve! Current news reports tell us about the ongoing impact that the Corona Virus is having in different countries, and in this we tend to hear more about what's happening in the US and the UK than anywhere else. Maybe there's an unconscious bias in the reporting, because we don't hear about the impact of the Corona Virus on South Sudan, or the increasing violence within that country, particularly Jonglei State. We don't hear about the ongoing conflict in Syria, but we can be certain that many, many Syrian women, children, and men will be suffering.

Then there has been the uncomfortable naming of systemic racism in the US, the UK, and Australia through coverage of the 'Black Lives Matter' protests last weekend. In Australia any number of statistics should leave us feeling unsettled from the incarceration rates of Aboriginal Australians, the lower life expectancy of Aboriginal Australians, and the appalling number of deaths in custody. Clearly there is significant work for all Australians to do together if we are to realise our aspirational value of 'Fair Go'.

But as we have reflected on these weighty things there was another news story that caught the attention of many, and unlike the pandemic and systemic stories this one has had a happy ending.

Last Monday William Callaghan was bush walking with his family on Mt Disappointment in Victoria. As they neared the top it seems he wandered off down a track and went missing. The family searched and called but could not find Will so they alerted authorities. The news report told us that Will was fourteen years old and has a form of autism which makes him unable to speak.

Hundreds of volunteers responded to the request for help and together they walked and searched through that cold first night. The temperature dropped to zero and understandably people feared for Will's safety. People searched through Tuesday and on into that second night but again Will was not found, and I imagine that his parents by this stage were frantic. But, on Wednesday a volunteer called Ben Gibbs walked along an old track and found Will standing barefoot in the bush. Ben had decided to sing as he searched because shouting out would probably frighten Will because of his autism. Ben also knew that Will loved Thomas the Tank Engine so he spoke quietly to Will about his favourite characters, gave him some chocolate, and gently took him back to his parents.

In the Gospel reading today we are told that Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion on them because they were 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'. Emotion researchers at Berkely University helpfully define compassion as 'the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering...'. If we accept that definition we could say that Jesus felt motivated to relieve the suffering of the crowd who were 'like sheep without a shepherd'.

It's interesting to note what happened next because Jesus did not say to his disciples - 'line them all up and let the crowd come to see me one by one so I can personally meet their needs!' Instead he called his twelve closest followers and gave them authority to cast out demons and heal all kinds of disease. Then he gave them the mandate, 'proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons.' Then that wonderfully mixed bag of people went and did what Jesus had asked of them, trusting that somehow God would sustain and empower them in this work. I say 'mixed bag' because the disciples were a long way from being a 'dream team' of high performers. We understand that they were an interesting mixture that included fishermen and a tax-collector; a hot head called Peter, and a double agent called Judas.

We could say that they were regular people we can relate to, even regular people like you and me. So in our time when Jesus looks with compassion on the harassed and helpless in our world who will he send to bring relief, healing, and hope?

I think you can see where this is going! It's often easier for us to think of ourselves as being in the crowd: harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd; and not the disciple sent by Jesus to bring healing and relief. Inevitably at times in our life's journey this will be true - we feel like a lost sheep that needs rescuing. But, at other times we are called to be more like those first disciples who were given authority and sent out on a mission to bless the world.

Ben Gibson, and a couple of hundred other people had compassion for Will Callaghan and his family last week and it demanded much time and energy to search Mt Disappointment until, in God's grace, the boy was found.

Many Parishes in the Western Region respond to human suffering each week through Parish pantries and Op Shops and these demand much time and energy to run, but in God's grace they bless the lives of many who are harassed and helpless.

However, compassionately responding to human suffering is not just for the chosen few who run Parish Pantries and Op Shops... I think we are each called to respond. So, what situation has moved you to respond in such a way that you seek to relieve suffering? It may have been a one-off response in the last week where you saw someone that needed help and you helped them, or

it may be a response that you have given time, energy and resources to for many years.

What has moved you, and what has moved me, with compassion such that we have responded?

Sometimes we can point to our financial support of organisations, or individuals, who work to make a difference in the lives of people suffering: those who are homeless; those who live with some form of mental illness; those who struggle to learn English; and those who have been impacted by natural disaster. And, financial generosity is a wonderful thing... but, how can we personally offer our limited time and abilities to make a positive difference in the lives of people who suffer?

You're probably already engaged in this space but I think it's important to note that some social commentators suggest that there is an epidemic of loneliness in Australian society. In the midst of all the connection that social media offers research tells us that huge numbers of Australians yearn for human friendship but cannot find it. We're not just talking about people who are physically isolated in their homes we're also talking about highly driven professionals who have become workaholics. Could these lonely people be some of the 'harassed and helpless' in our time? And, could we each recognise just one of them this week and reach out to them through a phone call, or a visit, and ask them the crucial missional question, 'How are you?'

Friends let's pray...

God of compassion,  
we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love.  
Open our eyes to see those who struggle,  
and open our hearts to feel something of that.  
When you call us to make a difference, even in a small way,  
Help us to hear you,  
and give us courage to follow the leading of your Spirit.  
We pray in the name of the one who sent his disciples to bless the world,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen

Questions:

1. What human suffering has moved you with compassion? And, how have you responded?

1. The Western Australian writer, Rory Shiner, suggests that, 'We welcome Jesus when we serve those who bring no advantage to us?' How can this be a helpful insight?

1. There is so much suffering in our world that some writers speak of 'compassion fatigue'. Do you have any experience of this, and how do you think it can be managed?

Supplementary Questions:

1. When you read the Gospel reading on which today's sermon is based, what strikes you as the most important message in the passage?
2. What parts of the sermon reaffirmed aspects of the Christian faith for you?
3. What parts of the sermon challenged or disturbed you?
4. What do you want to explore further because of today's sermon?
5. How will you live differently or what challenge will you take up from today's sermon?