

2 Samuel 7: 1-14a and Mark 6 30-34, 53-56
Sermon for 18.07.21 by Revd Carol Harley

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Stress is not a modern invention!! It is, of course, very real today! The modern lifestyle and modern communications have made stress more widespread and we are far more conscious today of its appalling effects. Stress is not a modern invention of this 21st century: this sort of lifestyle would be instantly recognisable to Jesus and the disciples.

The passage we are looking at today in Mark's Gospel tells us that the apostles have just returned from a time of teaching and mission. They probably have a lot to discuss with Jesus, and they need some time to reflect and relax. However, it seems unlikely that they're going to find time. Instead, the crowd are gathering around them and we're told that 'so many people were coming and going they didn't even have time to eat.'

This first of our two passages from Mark leads us into the Feeding of the Five Thousand - which is perhaps Jesus' most memorable miracle where, with supernatural power, he feeds the 5000 people who had earlier deprived him and his disciples of their chance to eat. But our main point is that Christ would recognise and empathise with the lifestyle in which eating is too often reduced to a sandwich grabbed in a spare moment, or there is no time to eat at all – and I'm sure we have heard it described as if, 'everyone wants a piece of me.' Again, Christ would understand.

In our second passage the sick and those in need follow Jesus wherever he goes. Just imagine the pressure of being constantly followed by large crowds who are desperate to touch you in order to be healed. Jesus's original plan is to get the disciples away to a quiet place where they could have some leisure time but his plan didn't work out quite as expected. He and the disciples get into the boat and head off to a quiet place, but the crowd, travelling on foot somehow beat them to it. And how does Jesus react to this interruption to his plans? We are told in verse 34 of Mark's Gospel '*he had compassion on the crowd, because they were like sheep without a shepherd,*' and he gave them what they were longing for – he taught them the word of God.

Jesus didn't heal to impress people, to convince people, or to prove he had earned his reputation as a great healer. He healed others because he had *compassion* for them. The author of '*Wishful Thinking*', Frederick Buechner, calls *compassion* 'the capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside someone else's skin.'

As we read in the book *The Compassionate God*, 'Suffering is the one place where all people – kings, queens, prostitutes and the marginalised – recognise themselves as frail human beings in need of God's saving love'. The longing to be bonded with other people is at the core of most human beings and is shown most clearly in the Jesus of Mark's Gospel.

He seems always to be 'drawn downward' towards those who are suffering rather than 'upward' towards those who are well off; drawn toward the 'harassed and helpless' rather than 'to the carefree.' And eventually, of course, this capacity for bonding with the suffering ones will be fatal, leading him to his own agonising death. On the Cross, Jesus's capacity to feel what it is like to 'live inside someone else's skin' will finally be complete.

Entering fully into the pain, the loneliness, the weakness and fear of another human being in this way is a very difficult thing to do. Most of us, even those of us who try to follow Christ in all things, find *true compassion* a very difficult thing to achieve in our lives. In place of *true compassion*, most of us substitute compassion's 'second cousin', that feeling we call 'pity'. But pity is not what Jesus has in mind for us, and pity is not what is being described in this text from Mark's Gospel:

- pity may heal, but it heals on its own terms.
- pity may help others but it does so from a safe distance.
- where *compassion* creates a bond between other human beings, pity creates a barrier.

The writer of Mark's Gospel is clear that *compassion* is the *only* true bridge between suffering and healing.

But why does this make a difference? Healing, after all, is healing; when you are cured you are cured, whether the person doing the curing has *compassion* for you or not. Isn't it the end, rather than the means or motivation behind it, which is supremely important here?

If healing itself were the end of the story, the answer to these questions would be simple. But in the Kingdom of God that Jesus preaches, the healing itself is *never* the end of the story. The end of the story is *always* our reconciliation with God, with other people, and with the whole of creation.

In every case, we are healed so that we may be a sign that God's reign has already begun. And most of all, we are healed so that we may be agents of healing and reconciliation in others. And if that goal is to be realised then the deep human bond of *compassion* is the key.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen