

INCONVENIENT COMPASSION

→ Two years ago, a 47 year old man was on his summer holiday in my home county of Cornwall, when he collapsed in a car park and died from a cardiac arrest. As his friend tried to figure out what was happening, a stranger who happened to be driving out of the car park stopped and asked what was wrong. On hearing the story he and his passenger got out of their car and immediately took control of the situation.

.....They both happened to be consultants from the Accident and Emergency Department at Derriford Hospital in Plymouth and amazingly the car driver happened to have the only piece of equipment that could bring the holidaymaker back to life – a portable defibrillator – in the boot of his car. After approximately three minutes, the holiday maker was restored to life and airlifted to Treliske Hospital in Truro.

.....The holiday maker subsequently learned that his Good Samaritan had rung the hospital every day afterwards to check on his recovery. He also learned that his chances of survival without the intervention of that stranger and that particular piece of equipment were nil. Thank goodness for someone in a car park that was willing to have their journey delayed, rather than pass on by – they saved someone's life.

→ This morning's familiar story of the Good Samaritan was told by Jesus in response to a question he had been asked by a lawyer. The lawyer is a good man, trying to understand better how he should live a faithful, just life. He is trying to get things right. So Jesus tells him a story which seeks to stretch his understanding and help him to cross the boundaries of those to whom he would show compassion.

.....So, what can we do to be saved? How do we gain eternal life? What is it that real followers of Jesus do? The lawyer came to ask Jesus these questions and you can almost see the smile on Jesus' face as he throws the question right back to the lawyer, "Well, what do you think? How do you interpret the law?"

.....There's not much doubt that Jesus would have approved of the lawyer's answer; to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself. Like many of us, the lawyer knew the right answers, but I don't think he was prepared for the story Jesus then told that showed him what compassion actually looks like in real life! Real Christians display real compassion, so what does this parable teach us about what that looks like?

→ Well, this story surely teaches us that our compassion is to be driven by the need and not by whether we think the person concerned is worthy of receiving that compassion. The Samaritan knew nothing about the person he helped and we don't know anything about him either. Jesus just refers to him as "a certain man..." Today we'd probably say, "Some guy ..." That's who he was! Just some guy! Just another human being! We assume he's Jewish, but we don't know. And maybe the Samaritan didn't know either. It's hard to tell when someone is lying in the road, having been beaten up! But that didn't matter because the Samaritan was driven by something bigger than racial distinctions or class differences; he was moved by compassion.

.....The Greek word that is used here for "compassion" is a very vivid one! It comes from a word that refers to the intestines, but it's really the equivalent of what we mean when we talk about a "gut feeling," that hunch that comes from the deepest part of who we are. Almost every time this word is used in the New Testament it refers to the love or

Jesus or of God the Father; a deep, inescapable compassion that insists on taking action.

.....So, when the Samaritan saw the man beside the road, he didn't help him because he deserved it, but simply because he recognised his need. When gut-level compassion sees desperate need, it does whatever it can to help. That's the kind of compassion that Christians are called to demonstrate, because that's the kind of compassion that Christ shows to us. He doesn't work out whether he thinks we deserve it or not. He offers it to us freely.

.....Notice how the Samaritan didn't just say, "Boy, that's tough. I'll pray for you!" and then move on and perhaps even forget to pray! He didn't just say he cared, he showed that he cared, even though it cost him time, energy and money. The book of James asks the question, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" The simple answer; "Not much good at all!" Those who are truly following Jesus display real compassion however costly or however inconvenient it may be. They don't shut out the feeling in their gut when they see others in pain or in need, but they do whatever they can about it.

→ We've probably all heard the expression, "This will separate the men from the boys!" What kind of things might we be describing when we use that phrase? Well probably things that involve danger and risk or courage and a willingness to sacrifice; things that are gruelling and gut-wrenching or things that require maturity and perseverance. And in a sense, that's what this parable does. Jesus wasn't separating the men from the boys, but he was making a distinction between one of his followers and someone who is simply religious. This story is very clear about what the religious people did when they saw this man lying on the side of the road. They kept on walking. In fact, they crossed the street and kept on walking. They just didn't want to get involved. It was far too inconvenient.

.....This is perhaps the most shocking part of the story that Jesus told. The priest was considered to be the holiest person there was among the Jews. He was taught the scriptures and he was entrusted with offering sacrifices for the sin of the people. He was allowed to go further into the Temple than ordinary people, so if anyone was going to reflect the character of God, then it would be the priest. But no! When he sees this poor man, he gets as far away as he can.

.....Many of you may have heard people trying to explain that action by saying that as a priest he couldn't risk making himself ritually unclean or he wouldn't have been able to serve in the Temple that day." Sounds plausible, but Jesus seems to say that the priest was also going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho which would mean that he had already been to the Temple and was on his way home. There was no good reason why he couldn't have helped this man. It may have been inconvenient and costly, but the opportunity was there.

.....Then Jesus moves down the religious ladder a little to a Levite. Levites helped at Temple worship and cared for the Temple. They were highly regarded in Jewish society, but not considered as holy as the priests. When he sees the victim, he takes a closer look, a bit like the rubber-necking that goes on at the site of an accident on the motorway. But once his curiosity was satisfied, he also crossed the road and went on his way.

→ Now, it's at this point that most people would have assumed that Jesus would talk about an ordinary Israelite coming along and helping the victim. He was using a stereotypical format to tell this story and so the story jars with the listeners when Jesus makes the third character a Samaritan. Most unexpected! It's a bit like us telling a joke about an Englishman, an Irishman and a Mexican, instead of the more usual Scotsman! By doing this, Jesus goes way beyond anything that the lawyer might have expected when he first asked the question, "Who is my neighbour?"

.....When Jesus did mention a Samaritan, his listeners may have assumed that this character was going to do even more harm to the man by the side of the road. They would certainly not have put the words "good" and "Samaritan" together in the same sentence! But, he was the one who did the right thing. He cleaned up the victim's wounds, he took him to a safe place where he could be cared for and he paid the price for that care, all at great cost and inconvenience to himself. But Jesus tells this story to help us understand what is expected of those of us who follow him. He calls us to display real compassion that isn't based on the worth of the recipient but based on their need. He calls us to display real compassion even when it is costly and inconvenient.

→ This is tough stuff isn't it? We all know this story so well, but if we're really honest, perhaps we would need to admit that often we are more like the lawyer than the Samaritan. We'd like to believe that loving our neighbour didn't quite have to stretch us this far and demand this much of us. It's the kind of story that slaps you in the face when you really think about it and begin to realise how limited our compassion often is. When was the last time that gut-wrenching compassion allowed us to be totally inconvenienced, to put our own life on hold so that we could help someone else, to cost us our time, our energy and our money. When was the last time that we really demonstrated that kind of sacrificial love?

.....So often we excuse ourselves by claiming that the problems around us are just so big that we can't even begin to touch them, but I suspect God isn't asking us to help everyone, just those that we find on the same road that we are travelling!

.....Many of you may have heard some variation of the story of a man who was walking the beach very early one morning, when he noticed a young boy ahead of him picking up starfish and throwing them into the sea. When he caught up with the boy, he asked what he was doing. The boy told him that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun. The man smiled and said, "But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish. How can you make any difference?" The boy picked up another starfish, then threw it to safety in the waves and said, "I made a difference to that one!"

.....As followers of Jesus we are called to display love and compassion to those who need it most. By God's grace and strength, may we make a difference to the lives of those that we encounter on the road, however, inconvenient or costly it may be for us.