

Pentecost 9 2024 All Souls' **COMPASSION** dtw

*As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.... Mk 6.34*

I once read a true story in a Reader's Digest (of all publications!) called, *I've Come to Clean your Shoes*. It went something like this:

A family had just moved house from the east coast to the west coast of the USA when they received some terrible news that a sister and her family had all been killed in a car accident back home. In complete unbelief and shock they were trying to find clothes and other items in order to catch a flight back to the rest of their family and for the funeral. They couldn't think straight and there were piles of boxes and cartons everywhere.

There was a knock on the door and when the woman (let's call her Jill) opened it, there was a neighbour whom they had briefly met the day before with a bag in his hand, who said, "I've come to clean your shoes". "What?" replied Jill. "I've come to clean your shoes. How about gathering up the shoes you'll be wearing for the funeral and I'll clean and polish them for you. That's one less thing you'll have to do while you find your other things."

Running her anxious fingers through her hair, Jill eventually found the 5 pairs of shoes they'd be wearing and brought them into the kitchen where the neighbour had laid out some paper and then he got to work. As Jill and the family went about finding their other things, they would occasionally glance through the doorway at this man just quietly cleaning their shoes. A sense of calm began to envelop their panic; more clarity entered their heads. This virtual stranger became a silent focus for the family's next fragile steps into their future.

And all because he said, "I've come to clean your shoes". If he'd knocked on the door and just said, "Is there anything I can do?" I think that in their bewilderment, they wouldn't have thought of anything.

Jesus saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Compassion means getting inside vulnerable people's skin and there are plenty of them around. Societal angst, depression and dysfunction appear to be at an all time high today. Human values are upside down because human value is less sacred. An increasingly litigious society makes people more wary of getting involved in anything.

God wants all people to be happy and whole, to know the blissful certainty of being wanted and loved. The Christian is called actively to promote goodness, beauty and grace in this life, to 'seek peace and pursue it'. We also need to be social activists where we discern, below the surface of life's tragedies, things that can be changed to make this world a better and a safer place. St Paul writes in Philippians: *whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing these things that you have learned and*

*received...and the God of peace will be with you.* (Phil 4.8-9) We are called to be the voice, the hands, the feet, the 'touch of Christ' in this world, as we considered 3 Sundays ago. People will always be different and thank God for that, but they don't deserve to be dysfunctional.

There is a big difference between mere sympathy and genuine compassion. I know a woman in a parish prayer group who always prays at some point, "Father, show us where there is a need today and help us to fill it". This world needs all the prayer it can get, but prayer backed up in human compassion. Someone out there may be troubled, hurting, angry, and you might just be the only person who could take that loving risk to dig below the surface and make a difference. Today's society, of course, would rather that you minded your own business. Jesus washed his disciples' feet; he perceived the real needs of others, the woman at the well, a tax collector named Zacchaeus, the blind, the lame, the outcast, the proud, the crowds, the hungry of body and of spirit; the grieving. He came alongside them, he had compassion. They found healing, new life, salvation. They were filled to overflowing. It was Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar who truly affirmed a balanced Anglican Catholicism when he said, "I cannot worship Christ in the Sacrament unless I also tend to Christ in the gutter".

When Jesus saw the crowd he had compassion for them. We can never overdo compassion. Unlike mere sympathy, it involves love in action. You can have sympathy but not do much about it. But compassion moves you into action. That's why you'll never see a card in a newsagent that reads, 'With compassion'. You have to DO compassion.

Jesus said "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." I don't know about you, but those words just sooth and envelope me as a human being; but they also require of me a mirroring love, don't they? And they require it of a church. As someone once put it, "Love wasn't put in your heart to stay; love isn't love 'til you give it away." Ludulfus of Saxonia in the 14<sup>th</sup> century penned some beautiful words about the compassionate love of Jesus. He wrote:

*Always and everywhere have Christ devoutly before the eyes of your mind, in His behaviour and in His ways; as He is with His disciples and when He is with sinners; when He speaks and when He preached; when He eats and when He serves others...How humbly He bore Himself among us, how tenderly among His disciples, how pitiful he was to the poor, to whom He made Himself like in all things; how patient under insult how gentle in answering, for He sought not to maintain His cause by keen and bitter words, but with gentle and humble answer to cure another's malice...How compassionate He was to the afflicted...how ready in serving all, according to His own words, "I am among you as one who serves"...how He shunned all display...how earnest in prayer, how sober in His watching, how patient in toil and in want... Amen.*