

NEIGHBOUR FATIGUE

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 24th November 2002

Matthew 25: 31-46

(Please note: This sermon has been sent to the website “as is”, with a few points missing that were elaborated on extemporaneously in the preaching of it.)

Neighbour Fatigue; what we do “for the least...”

Today’s sermon focus is on the Gospel passage, in which we read to the end of Matthew's scenes of the end-times, sections of which have been read on several past Sundays. Jesus announces his upcoming arrival as the Son of Man, who comes in glory as King.

Matthew describes the judgment process that Jesus will conduct. It's a no nonsense scene: Separation of the just from the unjust, the blessing of eternal life, the curse of eternal darkness, all carried out swiftly and surely, without hesitation or bargaining.

Earlier, Matthew has described the Son of Man as coming on clouds of heaven, and sending his angels out before him. He is fully enthroned upon the glory that surrounds him. Around this throne, before his feet, all the nations will be gathered.

There is a familiar image here of the Son of Man in a role as a hands-on shepherd intimately involved with his flocks. The shepherd is one of Scriptures' most common metaphors used to denote divine care and compassion.

More could be said in explanation of the passage, than time allows. However, it is worth noting that this is the only place where Jesus refers to himself as king. This gives an interesting side-by-side imagery of one who is both shepherd and king.

And how does the king judge? How does he establish whom the righteous and the unrighteous are?

The key to receiving his blessing (or being rejected as a goat) is based upon compassion and care of those in need - food for the hungry, clothes for the naked, hospitality for the stranger, care for the sick.

Those declared sheep and those judged to be goats are both mystified by the Son of Man's insistence that they did or did not extend these virtuous behaviours toward him. It's compassionate behaviour toward the least, the smallest, and the weakest members of the community that's praised. In v.42 Jesus specifically notes that welcoming one of his disciples is to be equated with welcoming Jesus himself.

Those who live the divine mandate to love are accounted as righteous, and are judged worthy of eternal life. Those whose actions reject that love directive are condemned to eternal punishment.

So much for some notes on the passage.

But what about your reaction to it?

I wonder if it was something like ... (spoken in voice as if annoyed / exasperated...)

Oh no... not another gospel passage, saying that we need to care for others!

It's much like that "Good Samaritan" story Jesus told, when asked the question "Who is my neighbour?"

Heard of donor fatigue?

Many of us have neighbour fatigue / compassion fatigue.

To be a caring, compassionate neighbour...

- Is a lovely, heart-warming thought, based on a moving and well-known story told by Jesus.
- Is wonderful... when my neighbour is pleasant, of similar culture and class to me, is not too demanding and is deeply appreciative of anything I do for them;
- Is burdensome... when that neighbour differs greatly from me in culture and class, poses a possible threat to my well-being, presents me with needs that overwhelm me and my resources, is emotionally draining, is located inconveniently and requires my neighbourliness just when it least suits me!

Let's be honest here!

- We probably know these passages of Scripture rather well.

We know what they mean: One who is needy, whom I come across, is (according to Jesus at least), to be considered as my "neighbour", across lines of religion and other human-designed barriers of race, class, etc.

- But we are like the person who questioned Jesus on who his neighbour was, hoping that Jesus' answer would set some limits in defining it – and perhaps we want to say "let's get real here, Jesus... we can't literally be neighbours to everyone, can we?"

Yes – let's get real. I wonder if we don't all struggle in varying ways, with these teachings of Jesus. Perhaps we struggle, in our thoughts and in our emotional gut-response, when our neighbour seems to be ever-present.

Our neighbour is not confined to the person living next door, nor limited to the friends and colleagues we have, nor even to our church community. Instead, our neighbour is presented nightly on our TV screens, in newspapers, in catastrophes of every description. Even when we come to church – perhaps seeking inspiration after the stress of our week past, and strength better to live the week ahead – we may be presented with yet another of a list of endless appeals to do or to give something.

Where will it end? Does it ever end?

Where can I go to escape from having neighbours everywhere I look?

I have “compassion fatigue”!

I want to make several points, in an attempt to deal with this issue and to be as practical as possible:

- Called to be neighbours in individual capacity, according to our circumstances, within our means - whilst avoiding excuses
- Are we are called to be a neighbour, in practical sense, to every need presented before us?

I don't think so. Globalisation has many facets, incl. presenting us with array of needs.

- Overwhelmed by the needs
- Like my desk, when covered with notes / files, or when my e-mail inbox is full:

“like eating an elephant – one bite at a time”

- Tell Jesus what you think and feel. Consider how Jesus might respond, remembering that he couldn't physically meet with and heal and sort out the problems of every person living in Palestine at the time he walked there! Ask for grace to respond lovingly, rather than out of guilt or in irritation. Ask Jesus to put you face-to-face with people or needs he wants you to have an impact on.
- The “Starfish story” ... (elaborate)
- But there may be too much focus on individual responses
- Corporate too. The church – local congregation, small or larger groups of congregations, organisations that act in a wider network or in a national or international arena

Also, important how we view ministry outside the walls of the church

- And as in my sermon 2 weeks ago on justice, based upon the writings of the OT prophet, Amos, there are people who act on a larger stage – provincially or nationally, in areas where decisions are made that affect large numbers of people. Opportunity and responsibility.

Good news stories: We hear so much of the bad news only

Headlines and streams of negativity tend to overwhelm - and frighten - and cause us to retreat

- People in our congregation who have striven to use their wealth for good (generosity / trust funds / wider employment / increase skills of people / mission and employment projects, such as those funded by the legacy of a wealthy person who left funds...)

- Garth Japhet / “Soul City”: Christian person, medical profession, using gifts and vision outside “church walls” in way that has had huge impact on life of our nation – such that TIME magazine recently reported on it
- A friend from a previous congregation in which I worked - Cancer Assoc, then Hospice, now in Richards Bay where she initiated a large hospice & home-based care for orphans, in work sponsored by a prominent persons’ National Children’s Fund

Close to home:

Ministry in Sweetwaters Settlements...

Catholic nun / market garden / preach and teach

Job creation on small scale – but gives hope & dignity, and compassion

Toilets for some people for first time – no flies, odour or disease

Bonginkosi, the man born with major deformities in his body

[yet story in press the week before, on a failed initiative...

only read it in detail after someone mentioned it; there will be failures and I can’t personally deal with every problem of our nation or its infrastructure or people’s negative behaviour...]

Umngeni Aids Centre

Recent meeting with community workers

Face-to-face with needs and pain

“care boxes” – R35 each, but that’s about the cost of 1 take-home pizza!

Let me conclude:

- It may be that I ought personally to be involved in one or more of these activities.
- It ought to be that I support them, prayerfully.
- It ought to be that I support them, financially, in my tithes.
- To the extent that I fail to do so, I am ignoring Jesus.

My prayers, actions and tithes help to enable the corporate body of Christ to be neighbourly, in ways that have real and meaningful impact on lives, in ways that honour God and make his name known – but all with an impact far greater than when I try something on my own with limited resources - or perhaps even give up when I come down with “neighbour fatigue”.

We ought not to be irresponsibly escapist, throwing up our hands in expression of “compassion fatigue”, unless we also choose to escape the Kingdom of God, and the requirements of Jesus for all who are members of that Kingdom.

Talk to God this morning, and regularly, about your role, who God would have you be a neighbour to, and ways in which you can help yourself and the wider body of the church be a compassionate neighbour.

The God who made us all in the image of God, requires that “righteous behaviour” includes not just personal and public piety, but a living of faith which expresses the true connectivity between human beings and divine image.