

## THE PARISH CHARTER – COMPASSION & CARING

Nicky Ing - 8th August 2004

Deuteronomy 15:7-15; Canticle 14; James 2:14-18; Luke 10: 25-37

A few weeks ago I returned from spending a months' holiday in England with my elder daughter and son-in-law and their three children (those of you who are grannies and grandpas will of course, like me, know that you have the most wonderful grandchildren in the whole world, just like I do!!) It was a special time being with them all and getting to know the children in their own home. One of the things I used to look forward to was the evening bath time and story before bed, in which I helped the youngest child who is three years old. We used to read Bible stories together and the one she liked most of all was the story of the Good Samaritan...in her book he was called the Kind Stranger. We had to read it often, as it was always her first choice! She always felt so sad for the poor man who was attacked by robbers...her eyes would fill up with tears whenever we came to that page, and she spent much time looking at the picture of the wounded man, and wondering how people could be so cruel as to hurt him and take all his things away. 'Look, Granny Nix, he is bleeding', she would say...and she would continue to be sad as the priest in his fine robes passed by and left the man lying in the road...and as the Levite also left him there in the hot sun. Only when the Samaritan came along and stopped to help the wounded traveller, her little face would light up with joy, knowing that the man would be rescued and made well again, and that a kind Stranger cared enough to bandage his wounds and take him to a safe place, paid for his ongoing recovery and also promised not to abandon him, but to return to him. It is a very well known parable...so much so that perhaps we often don't notice some of the finer points in it.

All the readings chosen for today reflect for us the theme of love: kindness, generosity of spirit...of not being hard of heart towards our needy neighbour....whatever that need may be...the Deuteronomy passage is very clear on this...the Canticle is all about God's love ..... and the New Testament reading from James, that famous one on faith and works, reminds us that from our prayer should come a response to God in the form of action...our prayer relationship with God being the important centre from which our actions towards others can happen. As we consider the theme of Compassion and Caring in our Parish Charter programme this week, these readings are all set to help us look at this important aspect of our Christian lives, both individually and as a parish. The word 'Compassion' comes from the Greek word 'sympathia'....which literally means 'suffering with'. It is an active word, it is clearly something practical, probably risky, it can be costly and often dangerous.....it takes courage, time, effort, patience, and it often uses our material resources.....Frequently, compassion can come from an unexpected source, as it does in our Gospel story today.

Jesus tells the story in response to a lawyer who approaches him with a question about eternal life....and who follows it up by asking...'who is my neighbour?' The setting could be well understood and pictured in the minds of those who were listening. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was only about 18 miles...but it was very rough and winding, and steep in places...a dangerous road to travel on alone, as there were plenty of rocks along the way where robbers could hide. The traveller in the story

was attacked, stripped and beaten up, and left for dead as he went along the road. The priest, and then the Levite, (both holy people!) failed to help..probably for fear of becoming ritually unclean by touching a bleeding body, or worse still, a dead person...or perhaps they were both afraid that the robbers were still lurking behind a rock and that they might also be stripped and robbed....or maybe they feared that the man lying in the road was only pretending to be hurt..and might leap up and attack them if they approached him. So they leave him lying unconscious in the hot sun. And then along comes the unexpected one..a Samaritan..Jews and Samaritans hated one another so this would have been rather a shocking and unexpected twist in the story for Jesus' listeners. The Samaritan is deeply moved with compassion, and feels compelled to help the injured man and 'go the extra mile' with his own oil and wine, his donkey, his time, and his financial resources. There is no doubt or hesitation when Jesus asks the lawyer: ' who, then, was a neighbour to the beaten man?' ... he immediately replies, 'the one who showed him mercy'. (even to mention the word 'Samaritan' was a taboo ..so much were they hated by the Jewish people.)

Jesus tells the lawyer he has given the right answer, and then he tells him: 'Go, and do likewise'. **Don't ask any more questions, just go and do it.**

I think this is quite hard for us. Maybe we like to sit back and think about doing things, instead of actually doing them. It is nice for me to believe that loving my neighbour means loving people who I'm close to anyway..or maybe it means doing kind things for people who might be able to return the favour...but this story shatters my complacency and makes me realise how small my sense of compassion really is..often I remain untouched by the hurts and needs and pain of others...what excuses do I use when I fail to respond to what I see? 'I don't have time at the moment'....I must set boundaries and make sure I don't step over them...otherwise I will be swamped....I really need to prioritise....I might cause offence if I interfere....I'm not qualified to do that..better leave it for somebody else...' Does that resonate with you too?

What have I missed here, should this parable leave me with guilty feelings? What is Jesus calling us to today, in our individual lives and in the community life of this parish? I believe Jesus **is** calling us to love and provide for others, whatever their need or situation. In Matthew ch. 25, he invites us to feed the hungry, provide for the thirsty, welcome the strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoners (that can be a figurative imprisonment...so many people are imprisoned by fearful and negative attitudes, prejudice, and despair). Of course, we will often fail in our attempts to follow Jesus' call to us....and when we do, Jesus himself is our own Good Samaritan who binds our wounds, carries us to a safe place, pours oil on us and pays for all our needs. By his death on the cross for us he paid the price for the sins of the whole world.... It is he who welcomes us and who offers us all that he is because of his great love for us. We have to first allow ourselves to realise that **we** are the wounded ones on life's journey...and Jesus himself is the loving friend who comes alongside us in our pain...**we have to allow him to minister to us before we can minister his love effectively to others.**

There are other lessons we can learn from the story of the Good Samaritan. One of these is that often God can use difficult, even tragic situations, to bring new life for us...if we allow that. My own experience working in LifeLine showed me that

many of the counsellors were people who had experienced all kinds of pain themselves..which equipped them to help others in similar situations. Abuse, addictions of various kinds, loss, tragedy...emotional neglect..many people have been helped to overcome these difficulties in their lives and then want to help others in similar circumstances. Their tough experiences enabled them to reach out to others.... **Thank God that this is happening!!!** And we do see it happening in our community, in little and bigger ways. The tireless work of the Umngeni Aids centre is an example of people using their skills and love to offer support to those who are suffering...again, good coming out of tragedy and pain..And then there is the work of PACSA, challenging issues of social and economic injustice in our society...thank God too, for that work and for the ways in which the women of our country many of whom previously had no voice, are now being recognised and affirmed, many in leadership roles. We are particularly mindful of this as we celebrate National Womens' Day tomorrow.

This week Jane Miller, Merriel Neumann and I went to an outreach and workshop morning for clergy and church carers at Hospice Conference Centre. It was wonderful see just how this organisation has grown and adapted to the changing needs of our society over 21 years. There is amazing work happening through Hospice..many of us here have experienced their caring ministry.in our families through times of bereavement and sorrow. Many people in our congregation have association with Hospice in different ways.. Claire Wyly spoke to us about how we need to **'develop our capacity to hold the hopelessness'** which we feel and meet so often if we are to exercise an effective ministry of compassion...how being alongside others (yes, being a **neighbour!**) and staying with someone else's pain and our own, needs both strength and courage...but how it opens up a bridge between us and those who suffer..a bridge which allows us to connect with others at a deeper level of understanding. We **don't** have answers, we **can't** fix things..but we can **be there**, in a spirit of listening and love. I believe we also need to ask God for the grace to allow others to minister to **us**. Sometimes our own pride gets in the way of that, we don't like to show our own need of care!!

So what is my response, and yours, to the parable of the Good Samaritan today as we reflect on Jesus' giving of himself so fully for us?

Can we offer ourselves to him and learn from him about true love and compassion? Can we keep Jesus Christ, not ourselves, as the centre of all that we are and do? I listed a few elements a while ago which seem to be essential for a ministry of compassion....and they are set out as a circle, a wheel with relevant scriptures alongside for us to read and think about. The vital centre pivot is Christ's call to us..the spokes of the wheel are the attitudes we need...the wheel's rim is our love of God, and love of neighbour, encircled in the love of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I made a few copies, so if you are interested, ask a sidesperson to give you a copy after the service, to take home and think about during the week. Just a resource, really. And if you feel drawn towards this ministry in a particular way, please talk to Nic or Julia, or to me about it.

I will end with an anonymous little poem which was read to us at Hospice the other day...it fits in with our theme of compassion today :

**If you would comfort others, you must have wept your own bitter tears.**

**If you would bring hope...you must have known despair.**

**Before you can offer wisdom, you must have behaved foolishly;**

**And before you can shed light on another's path,**

**You must have been lost in your own darkness.**

So our prayer is that each one of us may experience in a deeper way, the love and compassion of Christ in order that we may be better equipped to reach out and offer His comfort and healing to those who suffer, in these days. **AMEN**