



Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 25 September 2011

Radical Compassion

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.23-32

Last Monday we began our St Martin's Autumn Education Programme and it got off to an exciting start to a full church, with Nick Sagovsky brilliantly introducing our theme of Radical Compassion. Compassion, he argued, is central to all great faith traditions. All these major faiths have their own example of the Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Compassion is foundational to what it means to be human. Radical Compassion, he argued, is when our empathy, and solidarity for another moves beyond sympathy of the moment, into action. It asks "what must be done?" and demands change and initiative to end the suffering. Radical Compassion, the mercy of God, is at the heart of the Gospel. Look at the way the father of the Lost Son loses all cultural dignity by running to meet his returning son, brushing aside his attempted confession, and with clothing and feasting restores him at the heart of the family. The Lost Son is not under judgement, he is under compassionate love. Nick Sagovsky argued that again and again that in Christ we see compassion trumping a strict application of the rules. Where a rigid interpretation of the law prevents compassion, something is wrong. When the Landowner chooses to pay all his workers the same, and those who have only worked for one hour get the same pay as those who have worked all day, the compassionate desire to give everyone a living wage so that their families can be fed, is more important than pay differentials. When the Good Samaritan, unlike the priest or the Levite, stops to help the man robbed on the road, once again we see compassion breaking through the prejudice of the time. This is how we must love our neighbour, Jesus says: "Go and do the same." And then Nick Sagovsky moved on to discuss the issues of justice affecting those seeking asylum in this country.

What struck me as Nick Sagovsky spoke was not just the clarity of his argument; it was as though we were hearing the voice of the Gospel with clarity for our time. He was not standing in the way of this message, he was simply telling it as it is, with truth and humility, and it sounded brave, compassionate and just. I think I was not the only one who went away feeling that I had heard the Gospel again, and yes, this is what the Church should be about and this is what first excited me to faith.

There are events in our lives which make us question meaning. Surprisingly these are moments often linked not with strength or success but our own experiences of loss and rejection. How do we learn compassion? Perhaps the greatest teacher is the experience of our own failures, vulnerability, and need of mercy. When we are the outsider, when we are the shamed we either learn a new empathy towards others or we can choose to join the prejudice and the pack to defend and hide our own vulnerability by making someone else into the scapegoat or the victim. Think back to your own rites of passage – those moments when the Christian faith most spoke to you. Was it in the moments of strength and personal achievement – or, much more likely, in those times when you wrestled with loss, grief, confusion, doubt, exclusion, broken relationships, longing, pain, love, the longing for love and the fear and the longing we experience for those we love most. These experiences, the experiences when the facades of our self-sufficiency are opened up: this is where faith takes root. As St Paul says to his critics in his second letter to the Corinthians, "I will boast of the things that show my weakness..." God speaks to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

“My power is made perfect in weakness.” Our Epistle today is a hymn to that mystery and is among one of the most discussed and significant passages anywhere in Paul’s writing. This is the compassion of our God:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient even to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

The word in Greek used to describe this action of God’s humility is *kenosis* – self-emptying, the stripping away of power so that God enters into creation, becoming human flesh and living among us; the eternal, here, down here in the midst of our lives.

Here at St Martin’s we are rightly proud of telling the story of St Martin, the Roman who graciously shares half his cloak with the beggar. But notice, notice it is not St Martin who is the revelation of God, it is the beggar himself who in Martin’s dream becomes the Christ. We are not called to become self-referential but to a preferential option for the poor and marginalised, the refugee, the excluded, the *anawim* of God. “Whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.” Christ is incarnated in those considered the very least. Compassion is not just ‘do-gooding’, it is revelation. Our acts of compassion are acts of encounter with Christ himself. They are the events of our lives which change us. This is not the rich man bending down to help Lazarus, this is how Lazarus is our salvation, who we ignore at the cost of our humanity.

I remember the woman I saw searching for food in the mountain of rubbish in Indonesia, where the smell was so disgusting it made me retch. I remember sitting in Jakarta in the house church with its 18 metre perimeter walls to keep thieves out, on the other side of which babies, children, whole families slept on the road; and I remember realising that I was the prisoner and that if I was to follow Christ it must be with those who lived on the other side of the wall.

I remember at St Martin’s realising that the most important thing I loved about this church was its open door which allowed everyone in – each person unique. As we gather for Eucharist I realise this is our feeding of the 5,000 from all ages, circumstances, ethnicities, walks of life, and I am constantly filled with wonder by the people I meet in this place.

But as we know too it is not always easy. Our lives are also peopled by difficult, painful relationships, those wounded by life. I remember Sherry who I taught in Hackney, so disruptive, so much “mouth” as the other kids used to say about her, but miraculously on the day when the inspector came to assess my class, for the first time quiet and working hard. “Well done Sherry,” I whispered after thirty minutes, “you are working hard.” “The trouble is with you,” she shrieked back, “is you have to be so F...ing nosy!” We learn from our encounters, both good and bad. Search the shape of your own life – when all else fails God begins. We find God when we plunge down into the very core of life. What are the encounters in your own life which have changed you?

Yesterday a large group of us from St Martin’s went to The British Museum to see the exhibition Treasures of Heaven, introduced for us with great insight and humour by Neil MacGregor. Here, it seemed to me, we have the paradox of our faith: all that is suspect, all that we long for. The exhibition examines the cult of relics – the veneration of things that physically link the believer with the Christ story. Some of these may make protestants a little squeamish – the hair of Mary, a reliquary for the umbilical chord of Christ, a thorn from the crown of thorns, splinters from the true cross and the physical remains of holy men and women and the artefacts associated with them: a

hand, leg or foot of a saint, the blood, the fabric of their dress. These are objects of veneration enshrined in precious containers, studded with jewels. At the centre of the practice lay the basic confidence that humanity – matter, fragments of bodies, cloth, stone, wood, could convey the spiritual power of God. On the one hand one is made overwhelmingly aware of our common, mortal, decaying humanity; this emptying of God, becoming like us, linked with us, in the real blood, sweat, and struggle of this world. God in the midst of the real gory, tacky mess of things. We see the openness of his face in a first mosaic, the joy of resurrection drama carved on the sides of a fourth century small ivory reliquary, or Christ's face miraculously transferred onto the fabric of a cloth which was said to have cured King Agbar of leprosy... beautiful without the need for further miracle.

Yet on the other hand the paradox of this is also all that humanity has done to exploit the Christian faith, to make it part of the institution, the system, the empire, the business and commerce of the day. We hear a Gospel which at its very heart proclaims the radical compassion of our God and yet know a history which has manipulated the holy for its own power and has often been the very thing that perpetuates injustice and oppression and fails again and again to live the radical compassion of its founder. Would it were not so. Philip Pullman attempts to capture that paradox in his novel entitled *The Good Man Jesus and The Scoundrel Christ*. For in the religion of many the simple carpenter's son has become the Imperial Christ hijacked by worldly wealth and power: the Christ of the Crusade, God the superpower, God made in our own image, the image of self-interest.

How far that vision of hierarchical power is from the Jesus we hear about in today's Gospel, when he is confronted by the chief priests and elders, trying to trap him by asking him by whose authority he is acting. Jesus knows how the notion of divine authority can be misused and manipulated and refuses to be drawn. His actions speak for themselves and need no recourse to divine justification. Instead he tells the story of a man who has two sons who he asks to work in the vineyard, one of the sons says "No", but goes, the other says "Yes" but does nothing. Which of these two sons does the will of the father? A person's righteousness is not judged by the claims or promises he makes about himself but in his actions of service – whether at the end of the day he actually does his father's will. Jesus' teaching now becomes even more radical in the face of his critics. His words shock. He turns the religious hierarchy upside down. It's not about your race, or sexual activity or occupation; it is about the orientation of your heart. "Truly I tell you the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into heaven ahead of you." They are the ones open to receive the mercy of God.

One thing that always strikes me is how little Jesus himself has to say about sin. He seems much more concerned with lack of love. Perhaps that is really what sin is ultimately, the failure of compassion, the failure of love. How can you show God's radical compassion to others if you do not realise your own need of it? What is the difference between good religion and bad religion? Good religion opens up, empties itself of its own pride, listens, reaches out to the other with radical compassion. Bad religion indoctrinates with prejudice and hate. Good religion teaches us to love. Bad religion teaches us to fear.