

Second Sunday after Trinity, 5.6.16

10am Eucharist, Truro Cathedral

*1 Kings 17.17-end; Psalm 30; Galatians 1.11-end; Luke 7.11-17 -
Compassion*

Opening Prayer: "Speak, Lord – and help us to listen."

So, "Are you sitting comfortably? **Then I'll begin.**"

I wonder how many of you recognise that famous opening phrase from the much-loved BBC Radio children's programme, "Listen with Mother"? If you can actually remember hearing the live show, then you're definitely over the age of 30, as they stopped broadcasting it in 1982!

But that invitation to settle ourselves down and prepare to concentrate on listening, **really** listening, to somebody speaking or reading aloud is important. And in fact it's an invitation we could almost include in our liturgy to help us listen, **really** listen, to what God may be wanting to say to us through our Sunday Bible readings and sermons.

We've had our readings for this morning: the Old Testament story, about Elijah miraculously raising a widow's son from the dead; our Psalm, in which the psalmist is giving heartfelt thanks to God for their recovery from a life-threatening illness; our reading from Galatians, in which Paul is telling the story of the great 180 degree reversal in his life, from being a persecutor of the Church to proclaiming the Gospel, from being spiritually dead to being alive in Christ; and then finally, with deliberate symmetry on the part of those who compile the lectionary, our Gospel reading is all about the raising of another widow's son from the dead, this time by Jesus.

But with four readings there's actually an awful lot to take in! Maybe almost too much. There's certainly enough there for at least four different sermons, so many different directions I could take, so many different things I could focus on.

How well do **you** remember the readings?

It's not a question of having the right answers. Or of being able to remember absolutely every detail – like trying to remember all the different prizes on the conveyor belt in Bruce Forsyth's *Generation Game*!

There **are** prizes to be had though, different things for each one of us to discover. Think back for a moment ... Was there anything that specifically struck you as you listened to the readings? Perhaps a

word, a phrase, an idea? Maybe the sense of an overarching theme or a kind of gut reaction to something?

One of the things that we tried out on our recent Lent Course was something called *Lectio Divina*, based on an ancient way of praying with texts from the Bible.

It's not so much about analysing them critically – although that's very important and useful, especially in the light of modern biblical scholarship. But it's about approaching the Bible with open **hearts** as well as minds and trusting and prayerfully expecting that God will speak to us through his Holy Spirit. It's something that we can do either on our own – when it can become really quite deep and profound – or in a group, when part of the value of it is in learning from one another's insights.

In this month's *Cathedral News*, we're advertising a short course, that will take place on four Wednesday evenings in July, called *Pondering the Sunday Gospels*. We'll be focussing on four different passages from Luke's Gospel. And our hope and prayer is that it will help us dig deeper into God's Word, grow in our faith and continue to get to know and learn from each other. If you'd like to know more, then do read the article and talk to me or Canon Alan. You can sign up after the 10am Sunday Eucharists over the next few weeks or through the Cathedral Office.

But what about **this** Sunday's readings? **this** Sunday's gospel?

I asked you earlier if there was there anything that had specifically struck you as you listened to the readings.

For the second half of this sermon, I want to focus on what most resonated with me when I first looked at the Gospel passage and that has stuck with me since. It's the word **compassion**.

*As [Jesus] approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow ...¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had **compassion** for her ...*

The word compassion is used 80 times in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. In the Old Testament, it's almost always used to express God's desire to deal compassionately with his people. But something important to remember today, World Environment Day, is a wonderful reference in Psalm 145 that speaks about God's care for his entire Creation:

*The Lord is good to all, and his **compassion** is over all that he has made.*

We'll be thinking more about that in our intercessions and at our special Environment Sunday Evensong later on.

There are seven specific references to Jesus having compassion in the Gospels, including this one in Luke 7. An eighth reference to compassion comes in the story of the Prodigal Son and describes the wronged father's unexpected response to the prodigal's return - extraordinary, generous, overflowing love and forgiveness. It's clear throughout the Gospels that it's loving compassion that motivates all Jesus' healing and resurrection miracles, as well as other miraculous signs like the feeding of the hungry crowds, and ultimately his sacrificial death on the cross.

Think about the widow of Nain again. Having already lost her husband, and now her only son, this poor woman would have been in an absolutely desperate and destitute situation, with no living family member to provide for and protect her. In his compassionate response, Jesus is willing to literally get his hands dirty to help her, for of course as he brings the funeral cortege to a halt by touching the dead man's bier, he is making himself ritually unclean. Just imagine the extraordinary scene as this heartbreaking procession of grief and despair is then turned completely around into a fiesta of joy and celebration and restored relationship as Jesus tells the young man to get up!

The dictionary defines compassion as:

sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.

We can expand it further with words like:

fellow feeling, empathy, understanding, care, concern, solicitude, sensitivity, tender-heartedness, : brotherly love, gentleness, mercifulness, leniency, tolerance, consideration, kindness, humanity

Our text from Luke 7 follows on from the story of Jesus healing the Centurion's servant at the beginning of the chapter and both are set in the immediate aftermath of the Sermon on the Mount. Tom Wright says these stories "show what [the Beatitudes] life looks like on the ground, with God's love going out in new, unexpected, healing generosity."

I passionately believe that **compassion** is fundamental to God's nature and at the heart of the Gospel. God **longs** to have compassion on us. He models compassion for us supremely through Jesus and wants us to have compassion on one another. Not only those we already know and love, but compassion on the stranger and the refugee, the poor and needy, the prisoner, the whole of creation. God wants us to have compassion on our enemies and, perhaps hardest of all for some of us, he even wants us to have compassion on ourselves.

In Colossians, Paul tells us that,

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, [we are called to clothe ourselves with] **compassion**, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*

At the church I used to belong to up in Shropshire, each year, over the summer half-term – the youth group and their leaders run a wonderful event called *Soul Purpose*. Many of the students are in the middle of their GCSEs and A-levels and many of the leaders are busy teachers, but they give up their precious revision and holiday time to serve a deprived part of the local community, cleaning and decorating people's homes, running clubs and fun days for the children, tidying up and restoring the public spaces, organising events like barbeques and special services to help draw the community together. My younger son took part in it several times. It's an exhausting but incredibly joyous week!

I wonder where and to whom God wants each one of us to show compassion?

Might it be through helping with the Friday suppers for the hungry and homeless? Might it be through volunteering as a hospital or prison visitor or listening to children read in a local school? Might it be

through our charitable donations, writing letters or emails and campaigning on behalf of prisoners of conscience? Might it be through taking time to listen to somebody in distress and offering to say a simple prayer with them? Might it be by joining our Prayer Chain to pray for those in need? Might it be by asking God's help to forgive somebody who has hurt us? Might it be by seeking a fresh start with somebody with whom we are in disagreement or conflict, trying to put ourselves in their shoes, see them as God sees them, pray for his blessing in their lives? Might it be through seeking to pray on our own and with others for situations in our world where hatred and violence is rife and compassion is in short supply? Might it be through learning to receive God's forgiveness and compassion and restoration of our own lives, to forgive and be gentle with ourselves?

As we come to prayer in a few moments, as well as praying for God's world, we'll give ourselves time to think about where we - you and I - most need God's compassion in our lives and the healing, restoring touch of Christ to be at work in us and the lives of those we love.