



a distinctive compassion

Today is Homeless Sunday, it's also the important festival called the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – or to give it its old name - Candlemas. It's the day of the big Garden Bird Watch which some of you have been taking part in in our garden this morning – and yesterday was Holocaust Memorial Day. Last night too, this church building witnessed shocking stories of torture and imprisonment from Syria in the powerful documentary shown as part of our *Suspended* programme. A rich diet of themes, all of which I hope will find a place in this sermon.

I'll start with a story.

I sat next to a man recently at an event here for lunch. He sleeps on the streets and in the pews of our church regularly. Sometimes he's able to talk to us, other times he's high. Other times he's raging. Other times he's so low. In the summer he often bowls up to people sitting outside local restaurants and asks them for money – for his drugs – which he, over the years, has periodically come off and gone back on again. Recently, he and I were laughing about the first time we met; it was about 6 years ago on Christmas Day. We sat together in the church on that occasion too having lunch. That day, we'd been talking about where we were born and he was very pleased that he turned out to be a couple of years younger than me. I was born in Salisbury in Wiltshire. He was born in Harare, Zimbabwe. I asked him what Harare was like, expecting him to say something brief about the weather or the people or the size. He looked thoughtful, and then said rather grandly, with a knowledgeable nod, "Harare has an undulating topography". We really laughed – and decided he had a future in the tourist industry.

That answer stuck with me and instantly shattered any preconceptions I might have had about him as a "homeless man". He is funny, he's creative. He's thoughtful, intelligent. He's also lost, often furious; he's stuck, he's addicted to substances that, it seems to me, are slowly killing him. Sometimes when I see him, I feel that over these years, we are watching him die. We are witnesses, here at the church, rather helplessly watching him die. And it reminds me of Good Friday.

So much of our public conversations about homelessness are on the level of practical help, policy parameters, paid posts for key workers, outreach workers, resettlement workers. And statistics are important: this last Thursday, figures collated about people who are rough sleeping are shown to have increased 15% in one year and have doubled – doubled – in the last 10 years. Almost a quarter of all the people sleeping rough in England are here in London. And public welfare policy in the UK for at least the last 300 years has made a clear distinction between those who deserve help and those who don't. I was at a meeting this week where one policy expert suggested that today's "undeserving poor", to use the Victorian expression, are, in terms of social attitudes, people seeking asylum and refugees. Particularly since Brexit.

When we're faced with such suffering as the slow degradation of a rough sleeper, or the colossal scale of suffering we remember in the Holocaust or the contemporary cruelty we witness today in Syria and elsewhere, it causes us to think deeply about our own place as individual Christians in this broken world – and also our collective response as a community of Christians in the middle of the city.

The story that springs to mind is the one Jesus told in relation to a set of questions he was asked about how to live. His teaching to the crowd was summed up in a phrase they already knew: love your neighbour as yourself. "So who is that?" he was asked. And in reply, he told the story of the man who was beaten up and left by the side of the road. A few people hurried past, including some religious types. And then one stopped – an enemy, a sworn opponent. A Samaritan, a hostile neighbour to Jesus's largely Jewish audience.

When Martin Luther King Junior preached on this story, he said that most of us, when listening to it, identify with the people walking past. Our instinctive first reaction is "what will happen to me if I try to help"?

Do you recognise this response? What will happen to me if I stop, if I talk, if I engage? There might be no end to this. He might ask me for money and I wouldn't know what to say. He might be angry with me. Do I have to offer him a room in my house? Does he have to come and live with me? How would I ever get him to leave? We go from A to Z in a flash, and a simple "hello" opens up a world of unboundaried possibilities that, in the end keeps us away. Because we're focussed on the question that is about us. What will happen to me if I stop?

But Martin Luther King's question was different. He challenged his congregation to ask – not what will happen to me if I stop? *But what will happen to him if I don't?*

And I'd like to take it further. Jesus's story of the man by the side of the road and all the people's different reactions to him is so powerful because it's an everyday, ordinary story. And the genius of Jesus's parables is that I am – you are – every character.

So turn it round. No longer are you in a spiritual Groundhog Day – constantly worrying about being the person guiltily walking past. You are asking yourself a different set of questions:

What is the part of you that is the bleeding, left for dead part that the more efficient, breezy, functioning part of you hurries past?

And, importantly, what are the violent parts of you that want to crush and destroy the bits you don't like – the violent tendencies that lead you to self-sabotage, keep you stuck, keep you making bad decisions? These are some of the creative and challenging connections we can make when we hear these amazingly simple, but devastating parables: we are the beaten up man, we are the robbers, we are the ones hurrying past, we are the sworn enemy, and yes, we may be ready to help.

Because in getting under the skin of Jesus's stories, we discover a distinctive and sometimes surprising sort of compassion.

In Greek, the word for compassion carries the meaning of it being something deep in our gut, (in Greek, our "bowels"). It is compassion that breaks our heart, the same word used for when lightning and thunder split the sky. (*splanchnizomai*).

If we dare to pray for this depth of compassion, rooted in our own experience of ourselves, then this has surprising outcomes.

Because actually it doesn't just make us what's known in the jargon as "non-interventionist"; it doesn't lead us to a well-meaning head-on-the-side acceptance of whatever story we're told, that can in turn abandon that other person deeper into their addiction or distress.

Because when we get to know those side-of-the-road parts of ourselves, where we are hurting or lost, we know too that it isn't always the right thing to do to just accept the story we tell. Sometimes as Scripture warns us, we "deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us". We are ourselves perfectly capable of constructing fantasies about why we're doing what we're doing – and sometimes we know we need other people not to abandon us, or just accept our point of view, but to confront us, although it might make us angry at the time.

And so challenge is as important a part of compassion within the fundamental attitude of unconditional acceptance. And the context for that challenge to be held compassionately is to stay. Challenge and stay – see through

the consequences, see what there is on the other side of the anger and tears.

This Christ-shaped compassion, prayed for, deepened, cultivated, nurtured, makes us strong, joyful, broken hearted, determined - not quietist. This kind of compassion helps us resist the dangers of both passivity and vacuous over-activity but equally it is stubbornly committed to keeping the agency and responsibility of another person with them, not trying to take it away.

So much for the individuals. But we are a community too. And we learn communal compassion by celebrating the Eucharist. How?

Because this Eucharist is a forward-looking sacrament, not a memorial service. When we gather at the altar, we are looking at God's presentation of the future as it could be. All kinds and sorts and ages and backgrounds of people, joining the already-raised-voices of Creation, some of which you heard in the garden this morning – human and not – a cacophony of praise – creation just getting on with what it does, what it sings, what it cries. We join those voices in this meal where all are welcome, all are fed. At this altar we look for a future where there is no murmur of enslavement or injustice, even while we face head on the reality of it in the world as it is. What we're doing when we gather here is rehearsing a new just and beautiful future, promised by Christ when he kept talking about the *basilea*, kingdom of God. We practise it, we repeat it, we nurture our trust in the promise that it is true, that it's coming.

This vision gives us a framework for living – and our sharing in the Eucharist gives us a pattern for living. Rooted in confession and forgiveness, that puts at the centre of our life in the world the broken-hearted Christ, the night before he died, breaking bread as his body. And it offers to each person, to you and me, homeless or not, suffering or not, the invitation to be changed, to make different decisions.

It's that we are as a church – you and I as individual Christians are a gigantic invitation to live. To gather, to love, to forgive, to work

together for justice. To pray together for peace. Our task then is to keep issuing that invitation that we learn here at the Eucharist; relentlessly re-issue it. Every day.

All day every day, this church building is a magnet for people who are in trouble, lost, addicted, without a home. And thank God for it. But it's also really important to recognise the reality of that without sentimentality or self-congratulation. Some people, when they are that lost, or that hopeless, will lash out at the nearest person – and sometimes that's us. I regularly get shouted at and sworn at by men who are angry that they feel God has abandoned them. But the people who are our day after day after day welcomers are our Vergers. And they very regularly endure confrontation, aggression, sometimes physical violence, often verbal violence – alongside all the other things that they do. Of course alongside that pastoral everyday response, we cook meals – every Saturday morning – and through the winter Tuesday evening – we want to try to get to know people, walk with them, be alongside them. This is a daily encounter with heartbreak.

A final word about this feast today – because it seems to me it knits together the themes we have been thinking about today.

Mary and Joseph go to the Temple as millions of parents have before and since to present their baby boy. In spiritual terms, although he is their son, they are there to give to God what is God's in the first place. What happens there is that their child is presented back to them by Simeon and Anna as who he really is.

In theological terms, God is presented to God by humanity. God is then presented back to humanity by the prophets Simeon and Anna.

And although we at Christmas were describing Christ as The Word, here on this feast day, Christ is a wordless child. God becomes wordless, and it is the words of Anna and Simeon that speak out about the destiny ahead of him and his parents.

The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is the power of words. Highlighting the truth that rhetoric matters, that words

matter, and that although we often draw a distinction between speaking and acting, that speaking is in itself an action for good or ill.

Not all of us live to 84 like Anna or to an age of wisdom like Simeon; but there might be a set of circumstances that we can imagine that when they happen, we might be able to say with Simeon his amazing words: Lord now let thy servant go in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.

What do you think those circumstances are for you? It takes immense courage to ask yourself what might have to happen for you to be at peace with saying; God, if I die today, that would be OK.

The old name for today is Candlemas, named after the light that Simeon said had come to lighten the Gentiles. And so today, even while we see the immense suffering around us, and acknowledge too the very real suffering inside us, we listen to this old woman and old man and hear the power of their words; that light shines in the darkness even when we don't understand it – and that however bewildering life is, it is the case, as day follows night, that light will come again.

Lucy Winkett