

“Compassion Wells Up” a sermon based on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 and Ephesians 2:11-22 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 22 July 2018.

The writer of Ephesians paints a picture of unity for our deeply divided world.

A unity in the midst of old, deep, burning distrust and division:

The writer proclaims a unity where people are no longer divided into alien or citizen, cherished or condemned, godly or ungodly, far from God or near to God, stranger or friend, acceptable or unacceptable, hopeless or hopeful.

In Christ, the dividing of people ends.

More than that, in Christ God abolishes the cause of that division, laws that divide, rules that differentiate, practices that privilege, hierarchies that rank some above others, attitudes that separate.

Christ the human one, is one in will, in heart, in love. He is God's even as he is treated as alien and homeless, foreign and castaway. He manages to cross borders to be every category we might name.

So it is that he dissolves hostility and breaks down walls.

Evidenced on the cross where Christ the cursed outcast dies in loving embrace of all.

The murdered one as the compassionate one.

The holy one dying as an offender.

And so he gives peace to us, peace with God, peace with creation, peace with each other.

Making us citizens of God's world.

All able to access God's Spirit.

to be built together into one beautiful building.

to be woven together into one colourful mat.

All bound in one loving embrace.

All given our place in Christ.

All built together into a dwelling place for God.

All growing together as inhabitants of the presence of God.

This is who Christ is. This is what Christ does.

And the spirit makes us one with Christ, to embody who Christ is, what Christ is for, with whom Christ stands.

To be the body of Christ, one new flesh, one new humanity, one new dwelling place, one people.

How though does Christ take hold of us?

How does this unity of spirit enter into us?

The gospel today tells a story of stillness and action, centred in compassion.

In the time of Jesus, there were many healers, many miracle workers.

There was nothing unique about his healings or his miracles.

What stands at the centre, what seems distinct, is the depth of his compassion.

Remember the story.

Mark says the apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all they had done and taught.

Many people were coming and going and they had no time for leisure.

Jesus says "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves, and rest a while."

What is a deserted place?

A place of stillness. With creator and creation

Being present with Christ, in creation.

Where we are not beset by the voices around us

Where we listen for a quiet persistent sound only heard in stillness.

Where the sound we hear is more than the echo of our own voice and where our own voice is more than the echo of those around us.

Where advertisers are not telling us what to buy and how to look and who to be

Where our value does not depend on what we have or what we do or what we have achieved or not achieved.

Where we are more than who people tell us we are.

Where we remember we did not bring anything into the world and we don't take anything from it

Where there is space for God's Spirit

Where God's Spirit rises within us

The Spirit of Christ who makes us present to God, to the earth, to people.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk, a prolific author, who died in the 1960s.

"I sit awhile in the silent chapel and take it all in. The silence. The solitude. The beauty. The peace. I begin to breathe again. It's as if I've been holding my breath for months, trying to breathe under water, thrashing to stay afloat in our culture of war. I feel healed, disarmed, refreshed. I remember how to live in peace all over again."

Merton wrote of Christ as a transcendent and mysterious yet inner reality. When Christ is the inner reality, ego retreats. Ego is defeated.

Ego drove the Roman Empire and the emperors and empires of our day.

We can see that around us, can't we?

Ego-driven action harms people. Compassion driven action heals people.

Mark speaks of compassion as gut-wrenching, visceral.

In Christ, compassion wells up within us, bowels move, stomachs knot, love overflows.

Thomas Merton again:

"We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good. But this is only a secondary end. The one end that includes all others is the love of God. The truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of people or of sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the centre of your own soul. And this abyss of interior solitude is a hunger that will never be satisfied with any created thing."

So Jesus took them to a deserted place, to learn how to be with people.

And then Mark says:

"... wherever Jesus went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed" (verse 56).

Jewish cloaks had fringes with tassels that represented different aspects of the presence of God.

Towns, cities, and farms represented every social space in Galilee.

Jesus is speaking of gut-wrenching compassion that conveys the life of God, that touches every dimension of life, and that allows the pain of the world to move us in the core of our being.

A Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

'Could it be,' asked one of the students, 'when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?' 'No,' answered the Rabbi.

Another asked, 'Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?' 'No,' answered the Rabbi.

'Then what is it?' the pupils demanded. 'It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.'

We come today from many different kinds of places and lifestyles.

Houses, flats, colleges, retirement villages.

Can you make in your living a deserted place?

Can you find in your diary a deserted time?

A corner, a room, an icon, a candle, a bell, a beach?

To be still with Christ.

To let Christ fill your heart and douse the fire of your ego.

To let gut-wrenching compassion well up in you.

Thomas Merton again: It is in this that the deepest activities begin. It is here that you discover act without motion, labour that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and beyond all desire, a fulfilment whose limits extend to infinity."

What do we live from? "Come away to a deserted place.

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