

## Reflection for August 2, 2020

### **We Need Each Other**

*When [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.*

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

*Compassionate God, may your abundant grace and mercy flow upon us, so that we may truly encounter you in this time of worship. Breathe upon us the fresh winds of the Holy Spirit, so our minds may be open, our hearts warmed, and our souls stirred to the love of Christ in a new way. We ask this in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus has just received the devastating news of the death of John the Baptist, his mentor and (according to Luke) cousin, executed at the hand of Herod Antipas. He retreats to a deserted place to grieve, perhaps, remembering his patriarchal ancestor, Jacob, who was alone with his thoughts as he prepared to meet his older twin brother, Esau, whom he had cheated and from whom he was estranged. (As Karen Armstrong observes, “The patriarchs had to learn that no one could move forward creatively into the future without having made peace with the past”, *In the Beginning*, p. 90). Paul may have been thinking of Jesus when he expressed his own anguish upon learning that his fellow Jews had been expelled from Rome by the imperial order of Emperor Claudius and the Jewish riots in Alexandria: “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” (Romans 9:2).

We wrestle, like Jacob, with the place of grief in the midst of our expressions of confidence and hope. Washington Irving supposedly

once said: “There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.”

Despite his longing for privacy in the wake of John’s death, Jesus promptly responds to the waiting crowd “with compassion,” that is, with deep-seated, gut-level sympathy for them, especially for the infirm who had walked or been carried all this way seeking healing. Douglas John Hall offers this compelling description: “To feel compassion, deeply and sincerely, is to overcome the subject/object division; it is to suffer *with* the other. Not just to have a certain fellow feeling for him or her, and certainly not only to look with pity upon another—a pity that accentuates one’s *distance* from the other. Rather, it means to be thrust into a solidarity of spirit with the other—to experience, in one’s own person, the highest possible degree of identity with the other” (Jesus and the Suffering World, p. 22).

What does it mean to be compassionate like Jesus? Jesus understood the crowd. He knew the needs of those who followed him. Do we understand the crowds around us? How well do we know the people in our own communities? How would our knowing them help bring healing?

*When it was evening, the disciples came to [Jesus] and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves” (Matthew 14:15).*

The solution from the disciples is quite reasonable. The alternate solution from Jesus seems quite impossible: “*They need not go away; you give them something to eat*” (Matthew 14:16). To which the disciples respond: “*We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish*”

(Matthew 14:17). The difference between Jesus and his disciples is established, yet as the story proceeds Jesus forces them to participate step by step as intermediaries in the entire process: *“Bring them here to me”* (Matthew 14:18). *Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full* (Matthew 14:19-20). In other words, they are forced to accept and participate in Jesus’ solution (*give them food*) and not in their own (*send them away*). Jesus does not bring down manna from heaven or turn stones into food. *“He takes what is already there, the five loaves and two fishes, and when it passes through Jesus’ hands, there is more than enough, much more than enough, for everyone present”* (Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, p. 115).

Do we, like Jesus’ disciples, look at what resources we have and dismiss them saying they are not enough? Do we approach need with a sense of abundance or scarcity? When confronted with people with great needs, do we hope they will go away, or do we use what we have in order to do what we can to address the need?

Compassion is utterly central to the message and life of Jesus, and justice is the social form of compassion. To put the same thought in different language, compassion is the soul of justice, and justice is the body, the flesh, of compassion.

N. T. Wright, the distinguished British New Testament scholar, addresses some of the theological questions arising out of the pandemic: *“So often when people look out on the world and its disasters they wonder, why God doesn’t just march in and take over. Why, they ask, does God permit them? Why doesn’t God send a*

thunderbolt (or perhaps something a little less like what a pagan deity might do, but still) and put things right? The answer is that God *does* send thunderbolts—human ones. God sends in the poor in Spirit, the humble, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hungry-for-justice people. They are the way God wants to act in his world. They are more effective than any lightning flashes or actual thunderbolts. They will use their initiative; they will see where the real needs are, and go to meet them. They will weep at the graves of their friends. Some of them will get hurt. Some may be killed. There will be problems, setbacks, pandemics, but God's purpose will come through. These people, prayerful, humble, faithful, will be the answer, not to the question Why? but to the question What? What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send? God works in all things *with and through* those who love him" (God and the Pandemic, p. 34).

Paul assured the Christians in Rome that there is nothing in all creation that will separate them from the love of God. This is the meaning of grace, grace with the power to transform individual lives and communities, to repair what is broken within us and between us. God has a plan for humanity that includes redemption; God has taken on flesh to make it so.

With great foresight—one would say prescient--Mary Jo Leddy wrote a little book published in 2019 reminding Canadians that we need each other: "Canadians today need to gather together with like-spirited people who bear a sense of responsibility for this vast land. We need the wisdom and courage of Indigenous peoples; the excitement of newcomers and the energy of young people. What would it mean if we treated this country not so much as a possession or even as an achievement, but as a promise to be fulfilled?" (Why Are We Here? A Meditation on Canada, p. 84) May we ponder this possibility on this BC Day weekend. May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: *Mighty God, pour out your power and strength on us. Grant us the nourishment we need to receive your word. May your presence fill our lives and carry us forth, preparing us to be your people and equipping us to do your work in the world. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.*

*Rev. Bill Cantelon*