

2nd February 2020

Infinite compassion

With everything that has gone on over the summer with fires seemingly everywhere, doing so much damage to individuals, families, communities, responders and Australia more generally, I suspect many of us are feeling somewhat emotionally tired. Add to this the continuing escalation of drought conditions across large tracts of our country that haven't been impacted by fires. Our scriptures exhort us to live out of a disposition of compassion. No wonder we hear people talking of compassion fatigue.

The very term 'compassion fatigue' implies we have a limited capital of compassion and once it is used up, it is spent and we are left empty. The story we are told is that compassion is finite. And when we have exercised a quantum of compassion responding to incidents like these, it's like using petrol in our cars and our compassion 'gas tanks' are depleted. We end up rationing our expression of compassion to protect ourselves, believing it to be detrimental to our own health-care and to the care we offer to others.

But what if compassion fatigue is a myth? Perhaps what we need to do is tap into resources that nourish our capacity to respond to life's experiences out of a bottomless well of compassion. Indeed, research in the nursing spectre has shown no evidence that there is anything especially tiring about compassion.

Doing some reading in this area this week, I discovered that psychologists who study empathy say that, based on advances in the science of empathy: *Limits on empathy are more apparent than real. While empathy appears limited, these limits reflect our own goals, values and choices; they do not reflect limits to empathy itself.*

The article goes on to assert that empathy is not a finite commodity but, in fact, is a choice. It's not that we are unable to feel empathy and compassion for people who are suffering but rather that sometimes we 'choose' not to. Arguments against empathy, they say, rely on an outdated dualism between biased emotion and objective reason. What we need to focus on is actually our own values and choices. Empathy is only limited if we want it to be that way.

But we are a people of an infinitely compassionate God. The spirit of that God lives in us. And to the extent that that spirit of our God lives and breathes in and through us, we should never run short on compassion and empathy for those in need.

9th February 2020

Salt and light

It's been a bewildering time in the political world. Forged documents are used to attack Sydney's Lord Mayor and the Australian Federal Police decide it's not worth pursuing, even though they had very publicly pursued truth-telling whistle-blowers so recently. Senator Molan said quite blatantly on Q&A that he is not interested in evidence and goes on propagating uninformed opinion. The US Senate has given a corrupt and morally reprehensible President carte blanche to do as he pleases, even while acknowledging what he had done was wrong, because they didn't have the courage to call him in. It is quite unconscionable behaviour from people who wish to be respected and listened to.

Coincidentally, taking place in Canberra on Friday was a meeting addressing the question of how the lack of respect we have for politicians can be turned around. On the same day further revelations were surfacing of large grants awarded to organisations who knew nothing about it until it was reported in the media – awarded through an overtly partisan and legally suspect program.

I raise this scenario because it asks of us the very same question of integrity. Are we as individual Christians, and as a church, held in any higher regard than our politicians are? Certainly realities of failures exposed in the Royal Commissions into the stolen generation and sexual abuse of children has tarnished the Church's standing in the eyes of many. It is one of the factors that have turned people away from participation in the religious institutions of our land. Respect is easily dismantled and only hard and slowly established.

In this week's section of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew's Gospel, having just surprised us by declaring some of the most marginalised people in the community to be 'blessed', we hear Jesus say to very ordinary

people like ourselves, that we are not just blessed, but we are salt and light in the life of the world. We are the people who bring flavour and goodness to our society. We are the people who stand against corruption. We are the people who shine a light on the good and the evil in our world to help society make better choices. It is only the leaders who pompously strut around thinking they are entitled to their privilege, thinking they are above the laws they impose on others, that get a right royal serve from Jesus.

These are truly beautiful and terrifying words, as we noted the Beatitudes were last week. I don't always see myself quite as Jesus declares me to be in these verses. But I hear Jesus, not exhorting me to BE these things, but telling that is who I am (and who you are) – that we have that role to play in our community. Having told us that we are light, we are exhorted to let that light shine and be seen, to let it do its job. That's when the role of the Spirit takes over from us.

Let's humbly accept our role as salt and light in our community.

16th February 2020

What do you believe?

“We live in an age of expanding religion and a diminishing God.”

That is a stark and provocative statement. But also very true. These are the words with which Joan Chittister begins her book *In Search of Belief* that the Sunday Night Gatherings will be exploring together in coming weeks.

The truth of those words is apparent on many fronts. Evangelicals and fundamentalists are waging a concerted campaign to control the social and economic agenda of Western countries' nations. Radical Islamists are waging a concerted campaign to establish a new and violent alternative. Both streams are equally overtly religious, claiming the name of God. Yet it is increasingly difficult to discern in these movements the presence of the God I meet in the pages of my Bible – especially the God and Father that our Lord Jesus Christ revealed in fullest measure. With the rhetoric having descended largely into “my god is bigger than your god” we know we are in serious trouble.

“We have put God in service of what destroys and demeans. We have made God small, stripped him of grandeur, and fashioned him into the ideologue of the moment.” *Chittister*

“We are living through a moment when the definition of ‘Christian’ seems to come down to which party you belong to, how you stand on a few hot-button issues, and how often you say *Merry Christmas*.” *E.J. Dionne*

There is an urgent need to revisit what we really believe, what our faith is really about, to free what we believe from such captivity. In the prophecy of Micah and Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* we hear how God spurns sham protestations of faith and shows of religiosity. What God wants from us are lives that do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

What I believe has changed dramatically over the decades. As a young boy I thought my religion was being a Methodist, as opposed to being a Catholic, or one of the few Anglicans who went to a church in a neighbouring town. Then I thought being a Christian was being ‘saved’. I wasn't sure what I was saved *to* (except that it was wonderful), or *from* (except that it was scary). As I grew up I encountered other Christians who understood issues very differently than I did. And as we studied these things from the perspective of biblical scholarship, I began to reframe my understandings of what this faith thing really is about.

I've said many times that I have learned more from those I disagreed with than from those I thought I belonged among. And I now understand the faith quite differently to some of those who were most formative in getting me started in my walk of discipleship. Frightened by the multiplicity of religious explanations or designs for life, there is a temptation to revert to unyielding literalism that is more non-thinking than is genuine faith.

For these reasons I cherish the sorts of conversations the Sunday night group is beginning to engage in as we use the Apostles Creed as a framework to discuss what we really believe in this contemporary world.

Do you know what you believe? And why you believe it? What I believe is still a work in progress.

It occurred to me this week that the title of this column could, perhaps, seem arrogant ... suggesting I see things others might not. It's not intended that way. But something happened during worship last Sunday that I had not planned, and not expected. And the depth of truth in it only struck me as it happened.

Sometimes, in spite of the fact that I had planned the service, had planned the segment, and it panned out pretty much as I had planned, something profound became apparent that I was not conscious of until it happened.

During the *Early Word* time I planned to create a yellow centre with white petals all around it containing words that describe the gifts and contributions of the many members of this church. But I had not associated what would emerge with the familiar 'forget me not' daisy. You might have seen the impact strike me as we compiled the multiple layers of petals. I apologise to Rob if I sounded abrupt about putting rows outside so they could be read. But there is a depth and complexity in the petals of the 'forget me not' daisy.

As children we've probably all sat plucking the petals one by one from such a flower ... "she loves me" ... "she loves me not" ... "she loves me" ... "she loves me not" ... and on it goes all the way down until all that was left was the bereft bud at centre of the flower. The more we pick away the petals the less beautiful and profound it is.

At first I was concerned that we (I) would not be able to read all the qualities and giftings recorded on the petals at the bottom. But as the amalgamation proceeded I realised that that is how truly rich community life is. If we pull it apart bit by bit we are in fact breaking it down and diminishing the richness and profundity of what makes it so special. There is much about this community that I have learned since I've been here. There is much I do not yet know. And much I will never know. But that is okay. There is a beauty about what we are together as a faith community. I hope and pray that we will go on adding to that richness and complexity.

I don't have to know all the gifts and how they are being applied. But I keep hearing stories of the beautiful deeds of love and kindness and hospitality and caring that various people have received, sometimes from unexpected sources. And I constantly give thanks to God for the faithfulness of the members of this caring community of grace and love.

