**Mark 7:24-37**

**3 Principles for Living Compassionately**

The images in the news this week have been utterly horrifying. There is nothing I can say to make any sense whatsoever of what we have seen: the images of the refugees in Hungary, the sinking boats on the Mediterranean, the mass of desperate people at train stations and national borders and, most distressing of all, the body of baby Alan Kurdi washed up on the beach.

Utterly horrifying. Completely distressing.

I just don’t know what to do with such images. I don’t know how to react to the scale of this humanitarian crisis that is engulfing our world at the present time.

I have no answers to give this morning; only personal observations.

And one thing that I do observe, with gladness in my heart, is that the wave of public opinion has gone ahead of the political response and that the surge of compassion across Europe is now dictating Government actions.

The narrative is changing – thank God. No longer is this being framed as an economic issue, or a race issue, or a migration issue: the people of Europe, the people of the UK, are changing the narrative and it is now becoming one of straightforward compassion and care; that the people of Europe and Britain want to reach out to the people who are refugees and respond with love and care and concern in really practical ways.

The narrative is changing and compassion is rising. And that is just how it should be…

So, this morning, I don’t want to talk about the politics of this situation. But I do want us to think together about the notion of compassion and how, as Christians, we are called to reach out, in a practical way, to those in need And this Gospel reading that we have just heard, from Mark 7, has a lot to teach us about how compassion actually works. If you want to follow it with me, you’ll find it on page 45 in the second half of the pew Bible, the New Testament.

What I want to do is firstly to think about the context of the passage and then to draw out 3 principles that show us how we can show compassion to others in a very practical, pragmatic way.

So firstly, then, the context of the passage.

The first thing to note is that when Jesus performed these healings, he did not differentiate between racial groupings: he did not show compassion only to his own people but reached out with love to those who were of a different ethnicity too.

We are told in verse 24 that, “Jesus set out and went away to the district of Tyre”. This is important, because Jesus did not come from Tyre. Jesus was a Jew – and Tyre was a non-Jewish region: it was a place where Gentiles lived. For him and the disciples, Tyre was bandit-country. And there would have been all sorts of rumours and gossip and speculation amongst Jews as to how these Gentiles lived and the sort of practices they engaged in. There would have been an innate racism and suspicion amongst many of the Jews with regard to the Gentile foreigners who lived in the region of Tyre.

They were foreigners, a different people – “nothing to do with us; not our problem”.

But Jesus was prepared to go into their land and meet with them and relate to them as fellow human beings and not categorise them according to race or religion or the colour of their skin.

But in the second story we heard – the healing of the man who was deaf and dumb - we read in verse 31 that Jesus is back towards the Sea of Galilee: his homeland. And Jesus shows exactly the same level of care and compassion to the man he meets there.

For Jesus, there is no “them and us”, there is no “Jew and Gentile”: there are just human beings in need of compassion and grace and love.

In these two stories, we see Jesus coming alongside two desperate people: they have nowhere to go, they have no-one who can understand the agonies of their situations. But Jesus does not regard them by gender or race or religion, and instead just meets them in their humanity and shows compassion towards them.

If we are to be truly Christlike in our lives and as a church family here in Enfield, I believe that we need to seize this moment and ride the wave that is moving through Europe at the moment and do what we can to change the narrative, change the story.

It is not good enough – it is not the way of Christ – to think of people according to race and gender and sexuality and religion and be selective in where we show compassion and to whom we show compassion.

Jesus shows us a better way. Compassion is for all people, regardless of the accident of their birth. And as the people of God, we need to be non-selective in our compassion and meet people as people; not according to stereotypes we may hold in our mind.

So how do we show compassion to those in need? What does this passage from the Bible teach us about how compassion actually works? There are 3 principles for us to consider, I think:

**1. Compassion begins with dialogue**

How can we show compassion if we are not in dialogue with those who we seek to help?

Too often, churches have thought that compassion can be shown by writing a cheque to a charity and just throwing money at a situation; supporting mission agencies by giving them money and responding to Crisis Appeals by taking a special collection. Now, of course, these responses are very important – and I am not decrying them. But very often, the unspoken belief is that, once we have written the cheque; we have “done our bit”, we have salved our consciences and we can go back to getting on with life again…

That is not compassion. The word ‘compassion’ is derived from two Latin words that, together, mean ‘to suffer with’. There is an emotional and spiritual engagement with the situations of others that is at the root of ‘compassion’. And we cannot forge that level of emotional engagement just by writing cheques to charities. Instead, we need to form some sort of dialogue with the situation we are seeking to engage with.

And in these stories from Mark 7, Jesus engages in dialogue with those who are suffering. But what is interesting is that he dialogues with them both very differently and, crucially, he does it on their terms, not on his terms: he dialogues with them both in ways that they will understand, not in any way expecting them to meet him on his level. Look at the stories:

In verse 27, Jesus begins the dialogue with the Gentile woman by saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. Now, to be honest, that does not seem like a very friendly opening comment, does it? You’d think Jesus could have come up with something better and kinder than to compare the woman with a scrounging dog! But actually, I think Jesus is being quite clever here because what he wants to do is draw the woman into a conversation that will result in not only meeting here immediate need but will also result in the spiritual growth of both her and the disciples with Jesus. And they continue to talk in spiritual metaphor, and you can feel her strength rising, and then Jesus meets the need by healing her daughter. It’s an incredible dialogue.

But in the second story, Jesus acts completely differently. There is something beautifully compassionate about Jesus’ approach to the dialogue here. Here we have a man who is deaf and dumb – cut off from the rest of the world. I imagine that he must have been frightened and unconfident, not a lover of crowds, and deeply embarrassed when the crowd pulled him into centre stage to stand in front of this strange man, whose name he wouldn’t even have known. And what happens? In verse 33 we read, “Jesus took him aside in private”. That was such a loving thing to do, wasn’t it? He could have healed the man publicly and amazed the crowd - but his heart was moved by compassion and care and concern for how the man felt and, rather than make himself look brilliant by doing a public healing, instead he chose to act in private.

Jesus wasn’t into publicity stunts. He was into compassion.

And then, to express his compassion in an even more personal way, he carries out the healing in sign language, verse 33 again: “Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then he looked up to heaven…”

This is a beautifully intimate moment that shows us that Jesus always meets us where we are at, in ways we can understand: he doesn’t force us out of our comfort zone when we need healing but he is prepared to come into our world, engage with our frailty on our terms and bring us the touch of grace and love that we long for. There was a deep humility about the way in which Jesus showed compassion in these stories.

So when we want to show compassion to those in need, the first step is to begin a dialogue with them; human being to human being, casting aside our stereotypes and preconceptions about them. The first step is to do what we can, within our limited means, to build relationship with them. Of course to give money to Crisis Appeals. Of course to financially support Mission Agencies. But not to believe that, by writing a cheque, our job is done. Instead, we dialogue as best we can to build a relationship with the people we minister to but a relationship that is built on their terms, not ours - where the power lies with them, not us, and we do not dehumanise them through our acts of charity but seek to build them up as beautiful children of God.

**2. Compassion doesn’t look for anything in return**

Compassion seeks to meet the needs of people without any expectation that they should give anything back to us or somehow fall into line with our agendas or ways of doing things.

In the first story, Jesus says to the woman in verse 29: “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter”. In the second story, in verse 34, Jesus heals the man. But in neither story to we hear that the person who had received compassion then goes on to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus.

Jesus did not show compassion in order to get more disciples. He just showed compassion because it was the godly and right thing to do. Jesus did not have any ulterior motive in showing compassion: he just showed compassion. Full stop.

How I wish the history of the church was modelled on this example of Jesus Christ! The temptation for us is to show compassion towards others and then expect them to come and join us on our terms, not theirs…We want new people in church, we want people to become Christians and we will offer the hand of friendship and welcome to them. But ultimately, we want them to join us and become one of us and to play by our rules. Isn’t that the story of the Christian church throughout history? The church throughout history has become like a club with membership rules and many local churches operate like a clique where people are expected to conform in order to belong.

But that is the exact opposite of what Jesus is doing in these stories. Here, Jesus reaches out and meets the woman and the man in their culture. He doesn’t ask them to join his club, he doesn’t set any provisos for their welcome. He just accepts them as they are, shows compassion and grace and allows them to continue in their own cultural way of being.

Perhaps that is part of the mentality of a truly Mission-Shaped Church. Ultimately, a Mission-Shaped Church stands against the idea of Church as a club to be joined. A Mission-Shaped Church does not put boundaries around itself. Instead, it is prepared to dismantle the boundaries, to get rid of the idea of ‘Us and Them’, and proactively choose to show compassion towards others with different ways of being with no expectation that they should, as an act of thanksgiving come and ‘join us’. Through the MABS project, we will engage with many children and young people. Some may come to church, some may not: it doesn’t really matter. Through Tea and Chat, we engage with many at the other end of the age spectrum. Some may come to church, some may not: it doesn’t really matter. Through supporting Mission Agencies, we may engage with people from all round the world. Some may be Christians, some may be Muslims: it doesn’t really matter. We show compassion. We serve. Full stop.

So how does compassion work on a practical level? First, we build a dialogue to the best of our ability. Second, we don’t expect anything in return.

**3. Compassion simply meets the need**

These two people were desperate. Absolutely desperate. We read in verse 26, “[The woman] begged him…” The man in the second story was so desperate but he couldn’t even speak the words to express his agony. And Jesus very simply meets their needs: he casts the demon out of the daughter and he gives hearing and speech to the man. It’s as simple as that. He doesn’t analyse, he doesn’t dictate to them, he doesn’t preach at them: he simply sees the need and he meets the need.

That is compassion. See the need. Meet the need. Full stop.

There is nothing more to be said about that.

So, we watch the news and we feel utterly helpless about the refugee crisis. We think about our own community and reflect on those who are lonely, those who are grieving, those who are unemployed, those who are struggling with debt, those who are homeless, those who feel utterly helpless and unloved and unlovable. And we want to reach out with compassion. How do we do it?

First, we begin a dialogue – on their terms, not ours.

Second, we do not ask for anything in return when we engage with them.

Third, we just meet their need without any agendas of our own.

That is compassion. That is the way of Christ. That must be the way of St. Andrew’s, Enfield as we increasingly become a Mission-Shaped Church.

See the need. Meet the need. Full stop.