

Sermon 14th June 2020.

Christ Church Oakworth & St. John's Newsholme
Romans 5:1-5. **Matthew 9:35-10:8** (Sharon Quinn).

Good News

Have you ever been an individual in a huge crowd?
Maybe at a pop festival, or a Christian festival like
Greenbelt or New Wine?

It is easier to share our good experiences with others
about seeing Elton John, or my favourite Michael
Jackson, for eg.

Bad News

I have had bad experiences of being in a crowd, as a
minority, where I felt fear and vulnerability, just solely
for not being affiliated to the 'right' crowd, wearing the
wrong colours.

I used to be a season ticket holder for Leeds United,
and was a member of the local supporter's club. I
absolutely loved going to those matches, especially
the away games.

It was a great social experience, meeting the players,
celebrating the wins, sharing the disappointment of
the losses, even the bickering over which players had
not earned their huge salary.

I recall an away match that I attended, along with my
friend and her young daughter. We could only
purchase tickets to sit in amongst the rival crowd,
rather than with 'our own'.

We knew we had to pick them up from the reception
area that 'away' fans were not supposed to be. Our
foreign t-shirts were safely hidden under our coats.
However, the young girl stubbornly, and bravely
insisted on wearing her Leeds scarf with pride.

We were faced with a crowd of around 80 rival
supporters, about 6 metres away. They purposefully
chose to be there just to jeer at their rivals when the
coach arrived.

A few of them saw the scarf, which provoked them to
shout obscenities and spit at us. The only safety
barrier between them and us, was the full line of police
officers, linked strongly, to keep them under control.

They were the ones receiving the full brunt of it all,
whilst hoping that the majority would not follow the
minority, sheep fashion, risking things escalating out
of control. All we could do was to hope they had it
covered, and that we would get our tickets soon.

The *whole* crowd joined in when the coach arrived,
swearing, and spitting out their disdain against their
rivals. It is interesting to observe that only a few
deemed it acceptable to treat 2 young women and a
little girl in that way, and yet *all* agreed that it was
acceptable if aimed at their rivals, with no care for the
police.

We got our tickets, and safely seated. We felt safe
because we knew that a lot of the player's families sat
in that area, and so could trust that they would not
take our wrongly coloured affiliations too seriously!

All was fine, we just had the disappointment of Leeds going one nil down and having to remain quiet as all around us jostled and cheered in unison, united with their other 73,000 fellow supporters. It drowned out the minority 3,000 Leeds followers there, no matter how loudly they desperately tried to be heard.

A problem only began after we outwardly reacted when Leeds equalised. All eyes suddenly were on us 3, who were the only ones celebrating. A man seated near us began to swear at us, and he would not listen to reason. He soon had his fists clenched and verbally threatened to punch us.

The only reason he stopped harassing us was when he finally listened to my friend who was trying to explain to him that her cousin was one of the footballers on the pitch playing for his team!

Maybe we now belonged *enough!* Or maybe he stopped to think for long enough to decide that harassing a famous footballer's cousin was not such a great idea after all. Maybe it was the thought of a lifetime ban, or arrest.

We did enjoy the rest of the match, even though Leeds lost. However, later, someone tried to throw a brick through the coach window. Luckily, it just re-bounded. We were relieved when those around him persuaded him to leave us alone.

All that could understandably persuade bias that all football supporters are hooligans, certainly to keep your children away from. Especially if I shared only the bad far and wide.

It is only through a willingness to integrate with balance and facts, for example, anti-social behaviour or racial abuse laws *are* now more strictly enforced.

I am sure you get the parallels and comparisons I am trying to convey here about minorities and majorities, colours and affiliations, and especially human behaviour.

What is much harder is radically reforming deep-rooted cultural presumptions that people may have formed.

Ultimately, we all know, that tougher laws and punishments alone still do not always guarantee us safety, or peace.

Especially not the inwardly spiritually healing and forgiving kind of peace that a knowing loving relationship with God can.

Radical Reform

Jesus' attitude towards the crowds shows us the difference such a relationship can bring to our lives.

'When Jesus saw the crowd, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.' (v36).

The word compassion translates to being 'from the bowel', or 'intestines'. It sounds strange to us now, but it describes a deep inward feeling from the very gut, from the very insides of a person. The Latin word to describe this kind of compassion is 'to suffer with'.

Matthew purposefully makes a big deal of it, and he does so to make it clear to us, how this radically transforming compassion, should continue to be maintained in our churches, in our communities, in our faith today.

Radical compassion

To show such compassion in ancient times was to show weakness. The ideology of the ancient God's of Rome and Greece were cold, vengefully giving 'pay back' for sins, and so totally heartless to the suffering of humans.

Good News

Yet Jesus feels, as well as outwardly shows his emotional and very heartfelt response towards the crowds.

The very idea of the one true living and loving God, all knowing, all caring, with real compassion for us, especially one who is very much *with* us, and *in* us, even when we are suffering, is a lot to consider.

What Jesus is trying to convey is so radical, probably too much so, for some. It certainly could put barriers up which may prevent you from even considering it.

Chaff and Harvest

How can we convince people that to God, especially the poorest, most marginalised, most outcast of people, are as valuable as the whole harvest, to be healed, saved, and cherished?

Especially when they are labelled by their own leaders, as being as worthless as the chaff that is to be kept

separate from the valuable harvest, and as such then are to be totally disregarded and rejected.

Kingdom for Power

People are very aware of the political, racial, cultural, and religious kingdom, and the leaders and rulers over it.

Kingdom of grace

What so many are not aware of, is this completely different kind of good news Kingdom. One that is realised through Jesus, given so freely, without prejudice, without criteria.

God gave the world his only begotten son to bring it to our realisation. That is love!

It is indeed an overwhelming mission to spiritually connect people to the God of love and grace, especially when so embroiled in a culture where it is acceptable to ignore the basic needs of its earthly people.

Neglect of the poor

Jesus led by example. He purposefully, one individual at a time, committed himself to being in their presence. Even if they were tax collectors, criminals, lepers, adulterers.

The very people that the Pharisees, were supposed to care for, as a good shepherd should, yet did not even consider them worthy of being part of an accepted well-cared for flock.

Jesus tended to people in their physical, mental, and spiritual weakness, without bounds, without prejudice. He did not evade, ignore, or overthrow cultural difference. He fully recognised and embraced individual need. Jesus followed up with an active urgency to continue being committed to their care and healing.

All of us can recall times when we would be so moved by the suffering of others and respond with "my heart really goes out to them".

How many times though do we urgently and actively follow up on it, with a relentless determination to help that suffering person?

Maybe there are too many practical barriers as to why we cannot always do that. How often though does that make us not even consider helping?

The disciples certainly faced many barriers when they were commissioned to share the good news and to heal the sick.

They could not have done so to such a spiritually transforming success without the power, strength, and active example of pure grace that God gave us, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

It is in that same unity of trust, faith, and example, that empowers us with the strength and urgency that is needed to *be* the disciples, *be* the good shepherds, *be* the labourers, *be* the harvesters and stewards of people's wellbeing.

We have been freely given, this good news, this gift. We have freely received it. Let us go now and freely and continually give.

Amen