

## NORTHERN SERMON Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> February 2017

### 'Loving God by Loving Others'

#### **Story – Bourke St. rampage**

A month ago, Melbourne was horrified when a car was driven into pedestrians along Bourke Street. 6 people were killed, and at least 30 people were wounded. In the chaos, there were people who responded immediately with an outpouring of care, before the paramedics arrived. There were extraordinary acts of care by ordinary people.

The Deputy Police Commissioner said, 'We saw the best of people. The support they gave to people on the street, it was amazing.' The Premier noted that 'We have heard more and more stories coming out of just ordinary Victorians coming to the aid of their fellow Victorians. Reaching out, helping, providing assistance, doing the right thing.' Another comment mentioned 'bystanders who, mindless of their own danger, sought to help those who had been injured, responding with love, selflessness and courage.'

It's part of Melbourne's story now, and it indicates how the provision of care for people is part of the human character, and at times is almost an instinctive response.

This week, the pathway focus is on serving God by serving others – or loving God by loving others. Just as God delights when we respond with wonder and awe in a place outdoors, so God is pleased when we love others and care for them. For some people, caring for others comes naturally. They are gifted in caring. But whether caregiving fits your way of life or not, we are all called to express the love, care and compassion that Jesus exemplified. It may not be the main way that you express your response to God, but there will be opportunities in your daily life where a simple act of care can make a difference to someone's life.

This is the pathway for people who are either naturally or spiritually gifted as caregivers. However, it would be rare for anyone not to have received care or given care to someone else at some point in time.

#### **Bible Reading: Matthew 25: 31-46**

The Bible reading is a challenging one. We can identify with the responses of care – feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison. These are the acceptable, understood verses.

But to be true to the context of the passage, we hear about God's judgement - and that is more problematic. Or is it problematic? The concept of justice is as natural to us as the practice of caring. If the person responsible for the Bourke St. violence did not eventually face justice, there would be a huge public outcry. Justice is about seeing that actions have consequences.

Matthew has ordered his gospel so that this passage is part of the final teaching of Jesus before he faced his betrayal, trial, and death. So it's at a crucial time in his life. It contains a warning about the end of time – but it is also about the present – how life is lived according to the way of Jesus now.

Four times in these 16 verses the situations of need are reiterated: hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, prison - and three times the corresponding list of responses:

feeding, giving drink, hospitality, clothing, caring for the sick, visiting the prison. Four of these address basic human needs: food, drink, a home and clothing.

This passage is part of a whole section in Matthew's gospel where Jesus is responding to the questions of his disciples about what would happen at the end of time. Jesus uses powerful imagery and stories to help his hearers understand what he was saying. He describes himself as the Son of Man. (Briefly, the Son of Man points to the humanity and servanthood of Christ, but also reflects the vision mentioned in Daniel Chapter 7, verses 13-14, where the son of man is a figure of authority, honour and power. Paradoxically this glory ascribed to the Son of Man will be attained only through the suffering and humiliation of the cross).

Matthew uses apocalyptic imagery for the coming of Jesus to his judgement throne. Apocalyptic literature describes events that are going to happen or that are happening. Apocalypse is a Greek word meaning revelation – revealing what God is doing in the end times. The danger is that too much emphasis can be placed on the future, at the expense of focusing on what the meaning or intention of the passage is now. It can have a jarring effect, because some of the images don't fit with our social and cultural context, for instance the reference to 'eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.' The Matthew passage had very real significance for Jesus' followers at the time – and continues to have significance now.

It's a tough passage about care. It's not a wishy-washy, sentimental, bland type of care. It takes seriously our responses to need. Jesus refers to all the nations gathered before him – so think of what responsibility is placed on nations to see that basic human needs are addressed. How do our policies and practices in Australia match with Jesus' clear intention that he is present among the poor, the stranger, the homeless? There are complexities in the current debate about youth justice and the prison system, and voices advocating for humane treatment, which does not mean absolving criminals from the consequences of their choices and actions. The call to care is to respect the dignity of each person, whatever their situation, and to respond appropriately.

Hold in tension what Jesus is saying about the future, and that we participate now in the life of the kingdom of God, or the reign of God, when we respond with care to people in need. God's ultimate purpose is already being accomplished in the present. This is what Jesus prayed for: 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

A surprising fact is that Jesus says he was in the six different situations of need. Those who are described as the righteous responded with deeds of mercy, and they are astonished at what Jesus says to them. 'When did we see you hungry, thirsty ...?' Jesus meant his response to be taken seriously – 'Truly I tell you' – or 'I tell you the truth'. 'When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!' Jesus identified himself fully with the least.

He reserved his strongest words for those who failed to be charitable in attitude and deed to the least. 'When you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.' The passage finishes with the stark contrast between eternal punishment and eternal life – which is actually decided by the deeds that are done, and how people in need are treated.

**What is our response to be?**

Individually and corporately, we are called to help those in need, not focusing on what the eventual outcome might be, or trying to earn God's favour. The ones who followed Jesus' way saw people in need, and they served them. They lived their lives of faith focused on God and the needs of others instead of on themselves and their own needs.

And that is what God wants of us. Authentic actions - genuinely loving our neighbour, serving the needs of others, instead of selfishly looking out for ourselves. Seeing a need – having compassion – and acting on it.

As a spiritual pathway, loving others by expressing care is a way of experiencing God's presence, because his identity is hidden in the poor, the vulnerable, the least. Stanley Hauerwas in his commentary on Matthew writes: 'The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid the *least of these*.' (Matthew) Cathy Ross, writing about the Church as 'A Mother with an Open Heart' says: 'To love our neighbour, to enter into the presence of another human being is to enter into the presence of God.'

Extending care will be expressed differently depending on the context. It means understanding the circumstances which threaten a person's sense of well-being. It means understanding what contributes to the health of a community as well as what impedes its development.

In my visits to the Urban Neighbours of Hope community in Klong Toey, a slum in Bangkok, I have seen how helping women and men establish small businesses meets their economic and social needs. This kind of approach has been called 'economic discipleship'.

Northern's community involvement is called 'CareWorks' for a very important reason. The various projects not only provide work. People are cared for in the process. They know that they matter in a system which sometimes undermines their self-respect. Carrying out this work 'in the name of Jesus' – means that we meet Jesus in the people who are looking for work, around the lunch tables, walking through the Centre.

Asking questions such as – How will this person be better equipped to face the challenges of life? What is hindering this person from fulfilling their potential? Asking such questions of people themselves, not presuming that we have the answers, can direct us to care that is appropriate for each situation.

#### **Pitfalls of care:**

There are some pitfalls which we need to be aware of in the ministry and practice of caring. I can only mention them briefly.

**Caring boundaries:** There are limits for all of us no matter what our work or involvements are. It is not wise to encourage people to be dependent on you. The aim of care is to help people develop the capacity to function on their own, with help when needed, recognising that some people will need more help than others to reach that point.

**Recognise what you can and can't carry:** There are 2 interesting verses in Galatians 6 that address this. 'Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.' (Galatians 6: 2) A few verses later, this is what is said: 'For all must carry their own loads.' (Gal. 6: 5) Hold the balance. An interesting perspective in the story of the Good Samaritan is

that he met the need of the wounded and marginalised person but he 'did not give everything away ... he did not neglect himself.' He set limits on his involvement – he handed over the care of the wounded man to the innkeeper and paid for his care.

**Compassion fatigue:** It has been described as the 'cost of caring' for others. This is a recognised reality in the helping professions – ambulance drivers, emergency workers, and pastoral carers. I heard a news report during the week that more than 1,000 police officers have sought counselling help as a direct result of being involved in the Bourke St. tragedy. For any of you involved with people, watch for signs of exhaustion, cynicism, keeping going beyond your normal limits. A helpful practice is at the end of the day, quietly, maybe in five minutes of silence, place in God's hands the names of people you have been involved with during the day.

### **Neglecting those closest to us while we care for others**

#### **Practices:**

Some practical ideas for trying this pathway as a means of responding to the presence of God:

- Visiting someone in hospital or who is ill at home
- Offering to take someone who is lonely out for coffee
- Taking a meal to someone in need
- Checking on a neighbour whom you haven't seen around for a few days.
- Maintaining relationships with people who don't need you.
- Listening to what a work colleague or a friend is saying – listening to understand, not imposing your agenda
- When you don't know what to say, simply say – 'I'm sorry for your (loss, accident, illness). I am thinking of you. Is there anything I can do to help?'
- Ask God to prompt you about something that might be helpful in a situation.

#### **Pastoral Care Team:**

As a church, we are called to be a caring community. It is important that the whole church community is covered by care. So today we are going to commission a Pastoral Care Team. This has been formed over the last few months and they meet with me regularly for some training in pastoral care and conversation about what pastoral needs require attention.

Although I have the responsibility as Pastoral Care Minister, I can't get around to everyone. So if you are contacted by one of the team, they are doing that on behalf of Northern Community. They are carrying out care in the name of Jesus. Their contact with you is as important as contact with one of the ministers, recognising that there will be crisis or urgent situations when a minister responds.

### **CALL PASTORAL CARE TEAM FORWARD**

**Leader:** There are many ways that we provide pastoral care in Northern Community Church, because as one person, I can't do it all. We are called to love one another, and so the pastoral care ministry of this church is not in my hands only, but in all of our hands. Today we commission our Pastoral Care Team. They will commit to meet regularly with me for training and support. Let us now commission this team as pastoral carers.

**Leader asks the Pastoral Care Team:**

Friends, are you committed to offering pastoral care within Northern Community Church? Will you lead by example in your actions and in your words, in your prayers and in your spiritual life? Will you reach out to those in need, with open minds and open hearts, seeking always to be a healing and caring presence?

**Pastoral Care Team:** I will with the help of God.

**Leader to the congregation:**

Will you place your trust in these people, asking for and receiving their care? Will you acknowledge their responsibility as pastoral carers?

**Congregation:** We will.

**Pastoral Care Team:**

We thank you for your trust in us, and commit to do our best to live up to the responsibility of pastoral care given to us. May we all do what we can to make this a caring community, in the spirit of Jesus.

**Prayer:**

Loving God, thank you for the ministry of care. Thank you for people whom you have gifted to take on the responsibility of pastoral care in the Northern Community Church. You have called them to share in the joys and sorrows of this community and to bring the love of Jesus Christ into the lives of all whom they care for. We pray that you will equip them with all the resources that they need to carry out their responsibilities, and to contribute to the strengthening of this community, building up your people in faith and love. We pray that your Holy Spirit will empower and guide them.

I commission you as pastoral carers, in the name of God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the life-giving Holy Spirit, to take up this ministry and responsibility of pastoral care. May God grant you grace, wisdom and joy as you live out this calling. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

**SOURCES:**

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Cathy Ross, "Hospitality: The Church as 'A Mother with an Open Heart'," in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context, and Prophetic Dialogue*, ed. Cathy Ross and Stephen B. Bevans, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015.