

Compassion and Care, Rev'd Prebendary Giles King-Smith

Hello – if you'd like to read the Bible passage, it's from Mark chapter 6, verses 30 to 34 and 53 to 56. Read the bit in between as well, if you like. Just pause me now...

Hello again. I'm not by any means a devotee of "Thought for the Day", but quite often I just happen to turn on Radio 4, and there it is. And sometimes it's an absolute gem. Last week, I dropped in halfway through a reflection by Akhandadhi Das, a Hindu theologian. He was exploring the difficulties we may encounter as Covid restrictions are lifted, when some will want to dive headfirst into freedom (at last!), while others will remain anxious about too close contact, and other still will continue to wear face coverings in certain situations, as a mark of consideration for others. He raised the rather worrying prospect that to mask or not to mask might become a source of confusion and division; and then, right at the end of his three minutes, he landed on the theme that has run like a thread through the past year and a bit: kindness. And what he said stuck with me, like an arrow that hits the mark. He said:

"If you have to choose between being right and being kind, be kind."

You and I might want to respond by saying something like – "Following Jesus Christ gives us the way to be right *and* be kind". But I think any honest, humble examination of the story of the Church, while rejoicing in the immense range and quality of kindness in that story, would have to admit that, when push comes to shove, Christians have often insisted they are right, at the expense of kindness. From the huge aggressions and injustices which scar our history, to the astonishing damage that can be caused by just one person who is prepared to trample many others under foot to get their way, because they are convinced they're right, we see what happens when kindness is sidelined.

And of course, what the pandemic has shown us is that nothing trumps compassion, nothing should take precedence over a generous spirit, nothing beats simple, unspectacular, consistent kindness.

So here we are, in chapter 6 of Mark's Gospel, with Jesus and his disciples, as their mission to plant the kingdom gathers momentum, and he is pursued by crowds of people who are desperate for hope and healing. And his first thought is to ensure that his friends have a chance to breathe and to be refreshed. "Come away", he says, "to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." Often in ministry, lay or ordained, we make Jesus into a hard taskmaster, and

forget that he said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Crosses there will be to carry, but we are not called to Christian masochism. Jesus’ kindness to his weary disciples is a challenge to us – to learn how to be kind to ourselves.

And his second thought is for the people – “because they were like sheep without a shepherd”. They draw out of him – as his first response, which is God’s first response to all of us in our need – compassion, kindness. He will feed them in body, mind and spirit, and then send them home. He will go up the mountain to pray, alone, and then astonish his friends by coming to them over the lake, and calming the wind so that they can reach the other side. And on the other side there will be more people in need, more healing, more compassion. The first thing Jesus offers people is kindness. We might want to offer people “The Gospel” as a neat package; but Jesus starts by expressing, without reservation, the kindness of God.

Let me press the point. This kindness is not an add-on, an afterthought; and it’s not conditional, not an “I might be kind to you” sort of thing. This kindness is the unveiling of the fatherly, motherly heart of God towards his creatures. And while we may want to insist on the importance of repentance, of turning back to God if we are to be able to receive his love, what we see in every encounter of Jesus, with great crowds, with groups of followers, and with random individuals, is in the first place: genuine interest, a deep understanding, and a warm, heartfelt acceptance. And this kindly attention to people in all their frailty and need is what changes lives, drives away fear, instils courage and hope.

The tough bit is this: insofar as you and I kid ourselves that we’re self-sufficient, and fetishize our own idea of health and strength, we will not be in a place to receive this kindness. This is where all the tickers of right-religion boxes fall foul of Jesus. This is why the Pharisee leaves the temple as far from God from ever, while the tax-collector discovers a mercy beyond his imagining. And here, in this Gospel story, Jesus offers God’s kindness to his disciples and to the crowds that follow him, because they are “weary, worn and sad”. Life is tough for them, and there can be no pretence of being in control, of being on top of things. They are in a place of dependency. And so are we: if we can only see it, every breath we take is a miracle, a fragment of grace that doesn’t happen because of our own strength and wisdom.

God waits to let him be kind to us. And then he waits – as long as it takes – for us to learn to choose being kind ahead of being right.

