

Compassion: The Heart of the Gospel

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

St Mary's Church, Cuddington

Romans 9:1–5; Matthew 14:13–21

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning.

There is a question that seems to be asked more frequently today than perhaps at any other time in recent years.

Should we give to charity, or should people simply receive what they are entitled to as a right?

It is an important question.

Many people argue that governments should provide for people's needs through taxation and public services. Others believe charities have become too large, too political, or that their money is not always reaches those who need it most. Many families themselves are under financial pressure. Energy bills remain high, mortgages are expensive, food prices continue to rise, and many younger people wonder whether they will ever own a home. Understandably, giving to church or to charity is often no longer a priority.

We are also seeing a generational change. Previous generations often regarded giving to the church as part of faithful Christian living. Many younger people are still generous, but they often express that generosity differently—through online appeals, disaster relief, or environmental causes—rather than through regular charitable giving.

So today's Gospel asks a deeper question.

What motivates Christian generosity?

The answer is not duty.

It is not guilt.

It is not fundraising.

The answer is **compassion**.

Compassion Begins with God

Our Gospel begins at one of the saddest moments in Jesus' ministry.

He has just received the news that John the Baptist has been brutally executed. Jesus withdraws by boat to a quiet place because he needs time to grieve.

Yet the crowds follow him.

Matthew tells us something remarkable.

"When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them."

Notice what Matthew does not say.

He does not say Jesus first organised a programme.

He does not say Jesus first performed a miracle.

Everything begins with compassion.

Compassion is more than feeling sorry for someone. It is allowing another person's suffering to touch our own heart.

That is who God is.

Again and again the Bible tells us that God is gracious and compassionate. In Jesus Christ, God did not simply watch human suffering from a distance. He entered it. He shared it. He carried it.

Christian generosity therefore begins not with our wallets but with our hearts.

Compassion Sees People

The disciples looked at the crowd and saw a problem.

Jesus looked at the crowd and saw people.

That is always the difference.

We live in a world where fear can easily replace compassion.

During recent weeks many of us have seen powerful images on our television screens of migrants arriving on the shores of southern Europe, including Spain. Those images raise difficult questions about immigration, national responsibility, resources and security. Governments have difficult decisions to make.

But before we see a migrant, the Gospel asks us first to see a human being.

A frightened child.

A mother carrying her baby.

A father searching for safety.

A family hoping for a future.

The Bible never asks us to stop thinking wisely. But it always asks us to begin by recognising that every human being is created in the image of God.

Compassion does not remove difficult questions.

It simply refuses to forget the dignity of the person standing before us.

Paul's Compassion

Paul expresses that same compassion in our reading from Romans.

"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

Paul is not speaking about strangers.

He is speaking about his own people.

His heart is breaking for them.

Christian faith is never simply about "my relationship with God."

It is about carrying others in our hearts.

One of the greatest illnesses in our society today may not simply be physical illness, but the gradual loss of empathy.

We hear about wars.

Ukraine.

The Middle East.

Sudan.

Natural disasters.

Poverty.

Refugees.

Day after day the news can overwhelm us until we quietly begin to think,

"There is nothing I can do."

Paul reminds us that the Christian heart never becomes indifferent.

"You Give Them Something to Eat"

When the disciples look at the crowd they begin calculating.

Five thousand people.

Five loaves.

Two fish.

Impossible.

Their solution seems sensible.

"Send them away."

Jesus simply says,

"You give them something to eat."

The disciples begin with scarcity.

Jesus begins with compassion.

Every church sometimes worries about resources.

Will there be enough volunteers?

Enough money?

Enough younger people?

Enough time?

Jesus does not first ask,

"How much have you got?"

He asks,

"Will you trust me with what you have?"

Compassion Changes Us

There is another wonderful truth in this Gospel.

When we show compassion to others, something changes within us as well.

Compassion is not only a gift to the person receiving it.

It becomes a gift to the one giving it.

When you visit someone who is lonely...

When you sit quietly beside someone in hospital...

When you telephone someone who has recently lost their husband or wife...

When you help an elderly neighbour with their shopping...

When you encourage someone who feels forgotten...

You discover something remarkable.

Their burden becomes lighter.

But so does yours.

Compassion enlarges the human heart.

It brings joy to others.

And it quietly brings joy to ourselves.

Perhaps that is why Jesus says,

"It is more blessed to give than to receive."

A Word for Those Who Are Tired

Perhaps some of you are thinking,

"I haven't got much left to give."

Some of you are caring for husbands or wives whose health is declining.

Some care for elderly parents.

Some are living with illness yourselves.

Some continue to grieve for someone you loved deeply.

Some are anxious about children or grandchildren.

If that is you this morning, hear these words of Jesus.

He never asks you to give what you do not have.

He simply says,

"Bring what you have to me."

Sometimes all we have is our tiredness.

Sometimes our tears.

Sometimes only our prayers.

Yet even these, placed into Christ's hands, become enough.

The same Jesus who fed the hungry crowd also has compassion on those who quietly carry heavy burdens.

He sees you.

He knows your weariness.

He walks beside you.

St Mary's and Compassion

This is surely our calling as St Mary's.

Not to solve every problem in the world.

We cannot.

But to become known as a church where compassion comes naturally.

Where the lonely find friendship.

Where carers find encouragement.

Where the bereaved discover hope.

Where people living with illness know they are remembered in prayer.

Where newcomers are welcomed.

Where children are cherished.

Where everyone knows they belong.

During my years at the Bible Society, one piece of research remained with me. Christians who worship regularly generally give more generously to charitable causes than those who do not. Not because they have more money, but because worship shapes the heart.

Week after week we receive God's generosity.

Grateful people become generous people.

Conclusion

In a few moments we shall come to the Lord's Table.

Here we receive not merely bread and wine.

We receive the compassion of God.

Christ gives himself to us before asking anything from us.

He feeds us before sending us out.

The question today is not whether charity is better than rights. Justice matters. Fairness matters. Every human being deserves dignity because every person bears God's image.

But rights alone cannot love.

Policies cannot embrace.

Systems cannot comfort.

Only people can.

Only hearts transformed by Christ can.

So this week, perhaps Jesus is not asking us to feed five thousand people.

Perhaps he is asking us to notice one person.

One neighbour.

One lonely friend.

One grieving family.

One anxious colleague.

One tired carer.

One child who needs encouragement.

The miracle of the five loaves began with one small offering placed into Jesus' hands.

Perhaps the miracle Christ wants to perform through us this week will begin with one small act of compassion.

May St Mary's always be known as a place where compassion comes before calculation, where generosity flows from gratitude, and where Christ continues to feed hungry hearts through his people.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.