

St
Martin
in
the
Fields

Radical Compassion

The Gospel and Social Justice

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Compassion and Justice

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I feel very honoured to have been invited to introduce this series of lectures on ‘Radical Compassion: the Gospel and Social Justice’. Compassion is not a word you hear much these days – except perhaps in the phrase ‘compassion-fatigue’. Karen Armstrong, who writes about religion, recently launched a Charter for Compassion¹ which calls on members of the world’s great religions to recognise what we have in common – members of these faith traditions all affirm that *compassion* is of central importance to human life. In each of them you can find a version of the Golden Rule: ‘Treat others as you wish to be treated yourself.’ Armstrong finds this first in the teaching of Confucius, five hundred years before Christ. It’s there in the teaching of the Buddha, in the Hindu Scriptures, in the Scriptures of Judaism and in the Qur’an. It is there in the teaching of Jesus. It will be fascinating to see in the coming weeks how speakers explore this central religious insight in relation to protest, to art, to empowerment, to power and to freedom. It strikes me that compassion is so important we all need to spend time learning how to cultivate it. But if you wanted to take a serious course in compassion, I don’t know a university in the west where you could do so. What a strange world we live in where something which all the major religions of the world say is central to being human is almost impossible to study in a university. In a year’s time, British university students will be spending £9,000 a year to study almost anything except compassion - yet here in St Martins, and in places like this, anyone can learn about the way of compassion absolutely free – and through this winter I hope many will.

This course is called ‘radical compassion’, which is even more challenging. The word ‘compassion’ comes from a Latin root, and it means something like ‘fellow-feeling’, ‘suffering with’, a reaching out to the other in sympathy and care. The key thing is that in compassion, we are ‘moved’ by the suffering of the other (whether ‘the other’ is another human being, an animal, or even something inanimate, like a household plant we have failed to water.) ‘Radical compassion’, I take it, is compassion which is more than a passing moment of sympathy. It is compassion which comes from and reaches out to a very deep level – compassion which goes to the root of things, and asks what has to be changed to end this suffering. It is radical because it asks, ‘What do *I* have to do’, a dangerous question since the answer may point to a fundamental change in our own lives, to costly new initiatives. We tend to use compassion to talk about feelings of sorrow, pity or sympathy for the other. Radical compassion is prepared to move from feelings to action that changes the situations that cause human beings to suffer.

And this, I take it, is why I have been asked to talk tonight about ‘Compassion *and* Justice’. Compassion is something we feel individually; ‘justice’ is something we practise – or don’t practise – together. I once led a seminar on ‘justice’ with students from many parts of the world. I asked them if there was a word in their native language which meant something like ‘justice’. They all said ‘yes. I guess that all human beings in all cultures to some degree recognise compassion (though compassion is not a virtue in all cultures), and all human beings in all cultures recognise justice (though understandings of justice vary hugely). I’m struck by the way that children learn so quickly to say ‘That’s not fair’, and by the deep sense of injustice they have if they think they have been treated unfairly. But treating others as we wish to be treated ourselves, in the end, goes beyond ‘fairness’. We want to be treated generously, mercifully – yet this is not always possible. If treating us generously, say in distribution of food, means that someone else goes without we recognise ‘that’s not fair’. In human societies, whether families or nations, we have to work out rules of fairness – of justice - which apply equally to all. A central dynamic which leads us to question *injustice* and to work for

¹ <http://charterforcompassion.org/site/>

change is compassion. Tonight we shall be looking at ways in which compassion and justice work together for human good.

I want tonight to begin by exploring the central place that compassion has in the teaching of Jesus and so in the Christian faith; then to say a little bit more about justice; and then to take the example of the UK asylum system as a system which is founded on compassion and which offers justice to people who need it, but which paradoxically inflicts considerable suffering on the very people it is supposed to help. As we think about the interaction of compassion and justice, there are lessons to be learned which could apply much more widely - perhaps to the treatment of young people convicted as rioters, to the way cuts in the public sector are being handled, or to the behaviour of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Compassion in the Christian Faith

You could say the central teaching of the Christian Faith is that God is compassionate towards humanity – radically compassionate, because in Jesus Christ God shares this world’s suffering and begins a process of transformation that still goes on today. Time and again, Jesus speaks about the ‘mercy’ of God towards human beings. Even before he is born, his mother celebrates the news of his coming in the words of the *Magnificat*:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. ...
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation. ...
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly. (Luke 1:46-55)

Mary is celebrating the compassion of God (‘His mercy is on those who fear him’). God’s radical compassion changes the world and that change is going to be personified in the child she will bear. It’s worth noting that God’s ‘mercy’ here is not linked with the ‘forgiveness’ of sin. It’s much more to do with a new initiative on God’s part – ‘he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant’. It’s to do with empowerment for the poor, with turning the power-structures of this world upside down, with radical compassion for the oppressed and needy. Jesus is to be the one who demonstrates God’s radical compassion for humanity. The Gospels are a record of God’s compassion for humanity shown to us in Jesus – and an invitation to imitate that radical compassion in our own lives.

We can see that radical compassion in the way Jesus calls together his disciples, in the way he chooses the company of ‘tax collectors and sinners’, in the way he responds to the sick, the outcast, the foreigner, and in the way he challenges the religious and political authorities. Again and again, in the stories that he told, which were all about the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus taught about compassion – what it means to live by God’s values and under God’s rule. Think of the Prodigal Son. The younger son wasted his inheritance in a foreign land, and when he had nothing left and was starving he decided to go home and face his father. In what for me is one of the most moving lines of the whole Bible, we read, ‘While he was still far off, his father saw him and *was filled with compassion*; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” (Lk 15:20-21) Jesus encourages us to think of God as a loving parent, whose ‘welcome home’ enables a lost son to face up to his own stupidity and selfishness. His older brother, of course, thinks the welcome home isn’t fair: his brother has had what is due to him as an advance. It’s all gone. The elder brother never got a party like this. He can’t see that in God’s kingdom compassion trumps a rigid application of the rules – a point we need to bear in mind for later.

Jesus told another story which has remarkable contemporary relevance. This is the story of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16). Once more it begins, ‘The Kingdom of heaven is like...’. This time it’s like a householder who went out into the market place to hire day labourers to do a day’s work in his vineyard. He agrees to pay them a fair day’s wage. He goes out at 9am, noon, 3pm and even just before sunset, and each time hires more workers, promising them a fair day’s wage. At the end of the day, he gets his steward to call the workers, and, beginning with those hired at the end of the day, he pays them each a full day’s wage (we might say a ‘living wage’) – he pays them exactly the same. The ones who have worked all day are outraged and complain, so he says to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am

generous [we might say, *compassionate*]?' (Mt 20:13-16) The point is that at the end of the day each of the workers has enough to feed themselves and their family. The householder is concerned that there is a minimum below which each worker is not allowed to fall. Because he is compassionate, they and their families are not going to starve. Those who started work early are more concerned with differentials. They have not learnt that in the kingdom of heaven mercy trumps a strict application of the rules. In this city of London, where so many have insecure employment on the lowest possible wages, the question of a fair minimum wage – the importance of earning 'enough' - has enormous contemporary relevance.

Then there is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Jesus told this in response to a question from a bright lawyer, who stood up 'to test' him. "'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'" The lawyer's question was about a definition – he wanted a rule that he could keep. In response, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan - about the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, being mugged and robbed and left for dead. A priest and a levite, both religious figures, pass by the body on the other side of the road as the religious rules say they mustn't be contaminated by a corpse. But a Samaritan, who was regarded by orthodox Jews as contaminated anyway did the human thing: 'he had compassion'. He stopped, took care of the man's wounds, took the man to an inn, paid a deposit for his stay and promised to cover the rest. 'Which of the three', asked Jesus, proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?' The lawyer had no option but to say, 'the one who showed *compassion*' (we might note, not just by feeling for his suffering, but by doing the practical things that were needed to help the wounded man). Jesus ends the story by saying, 'Go and do thou likewise.' It's a beautiful story, which shows once more how compassion trumps a strict application of the religious rules. My neighbour is the person in need. 'Go and do thou likewise' says Jesus to the lawyer – and to all who read this story.

Justice

I have said several times that for Jesus 'compassion trumps a strict application of the rules'. I put it this way because I didn't want to say 'compassion trumps justice'. It doesn't. What Jesus shows again and again is that *compassion is part of justice*: the desire for justice begins with compassion. If there is a word that occurs as often as 'mercy' or 'compassion' in the Scriptures, it is 'justice'. 'Seek first God's kingdom and his justice' (Mt 6:33), Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout the Scriptures, 'justice' is a matter of right relations: right relations with God ('you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind') and right relations with your neighbour ('you shall love your neighbour as yourself'). This is what the just person does – it's an impossibly high standard and this is why the lawyer was looking for something less demanding: 'You can't really mean we are to treat *everybody* like this, can you?' The Hebrew Bible makes it clear that 'justice' is to be the way of life for the God's people. They are to be a people who live in right relations with God and with each other:

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. *Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue*, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Dt 16: 18-20)

It is clear from this, and from the whole of Deuteronomy, that there have to be rules. God gives his people the Law and they are expected to keep it. The point is that the Law teaches compassion ('You shall love your neighbour as yourself'). Where the Law, where a rigid interpretation of justice, stops a person being compassionate, something is wrong. Compassion trumps a rigid interpretation of the rules.

This doesn't mean the Law doesn't matter. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.' (Mt 5: 18). In the same way, Paul says 'The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good' (Rom 7:12). The law is there to show us the way of compassion: 'Blessed are the merciful', says Jesus, 'for they will receive mercy' (Mt 5:7).

I have been talking about the religious law, the law we read in the Bible. That's what guided the Israelites in their everyday lives. The law of the state, the law of Rome, was much less detailed. It didn't ask much, provided that people recognised the authority of Caesar, didn't rebel, and paid their taxes. There's a famous story about the time Jesus was asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. It was a trick question, because to pay taxes meant to recognise someone's authority. If he said 'yes', he publicly supported Caesar's authority; if he said 'no', he was a rebel. This was when he took a coin which showed the head of Caesar and said, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's' (Lk 20:25). There's been a lot of debate about what Jesus meant, but I take it he was saying, 'Pay your taxes to the state – and give God *his* due as well'. The authorities in this world have their place *under* God, but God has his place and you must respect both. In other words, you must keep the law of the state, so long as it does not clash with the law of God.

When we talk about 'justice', we use the word in two senses, but both are to do with right relations. If in this country we talk about the work of the Ministry of Justice and the rule of law, we are using the word 'justice' in a legal sense. It is the responsibility of parliament to see that we have good laws and the work of judges to see they are enforced fairly. When the law is broken, justice must be done. We have very strict guidelines for sentencing and for settling civil disputes. But we also use the term 'justice' in a sense more like that of the Bible – to mean social justice or 'fairness' in society - the fair distribution of wealth, opportunity and resources. The need for 'fairness' in society raises very difficult issues: what are fair levels of taxation, how do we share the burden of the financial deficit our country is currently facing fairly, how do we make the limited resources of NHS treatment available fairly? These two sense of the word justice, the legal sense and the social sense, come together when we ask, 'What is a just society and how should we be working to make Britain a more just society?'

This is a huge question – too big for one evening – so I want to take a specific example which shows in some respects how justice is upheld, and in other ways how compassion leads us to identify injustice and to continue to work for radical change. I want to take the example of the UK Asylum System.

The UK Asylum System

I am taking this example not because I want us tie our discussion of compassion and justice down to asylum but because this is something I know a bit about and because it shows so clearly some of the wider dilemmas we face about justice and compassion in our world.

In 1939, the world went to war because of the injustice of the Nazi regime in Germany, which had invaded Poland. By doing so, it offended against right relations between the states of Europe as it had done before and would clearly do again. From 1934, it had treated Jews and other minorities with ever greater injustice, so that many began to flee to other countries. Some were given sanctuary but many were turned away by the UK and other states. After the war, when the world learnt about the unspeakable injustices of the Holocaust, there was a huge sense of compassion and guilt amongst the victor nations. As a defence against injustice, they began to embed human rights in their relations with one another. The United Nations was founded in 1945, and the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Three years later the Refugee Convention laid down the principle that victims of the War with 'a well-founded fear of persecution' on the grounds of 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' had a right to asylum in other countries – a principle which was extended universally (it was no longer related specifically to those displaced by the Second World War) in 1967. In this way, a response which began with compassion became embedded in international human rights law.

Britain is now committed to giving asylum to anyone who can demonstrate they have a well-founded fear of persecution for any of the reasons I have listed. We are also committed by the Human Rights Act of 1998 not to return people who claim asylum here to their country of origin if by doing so their human rights will be violated. These are major commitments which cost us a lot of money. Our system may not work well, but I think we should celebrate the fact that we have a system governed by law (and not just quotas governed by political expediency). Through our asylum system countless lives have been saved. What started as a failure of compassion has become a matter of justice: people who have a well-founded fear of persecution, as did the Jews and other minorities under the Nazi regime, have a *right* to asylum. The law has become an instrument of compassion.

The trouble is that that the law is a very blunt instrument. When people claim asylum, usually at the point of entry to the UK, their claim is tested by the UK Border Agency. The first duty of the Border Agency is to make sure that the only people who cross our borders are those who have a right to do so. Proving a 'well-founded fear of persecution' is difficult and refusing a claim for asylum is easy. Most claims are initially

refused. When a claim is refused, there is usually an appeal to the independent Immigration and Asylum Tribunal, before an immigration judge and with the help of a lawyer. These claims are often badly handled because the legal aid provided is limited to five hours. Nevertheless, more than a quarter are upheld. It is often extremely difficult for people seeking asylum to get a lawyer to take their case any further and they know that before long they are likely to be deported. Sometimes the process is over in a matter of days; sometimes it takes years.

Most asylum seekers don't have accommodation, so they are housed by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and given a card to buy food at one supermarket. If they are thought to be at risk of absconding they may be detained in a removal centre. If they are in the community they have to report to the authorities regularly. They are not allowed to work and opportunities to integrate, say by learning English, may be very limited.

All of this makes sense in theory. In theory, it is not unjust, and it shouldn't last very long – but again and again what happens in practice is very different.

For people who come from a war-torn country, or a background of extreme poverty, where there is no work, getting the right to remain in the UK is an immense prize. The incentive to defeat the system is huge. The terms on which asylum is granted are relatively narrow, but the numbers who need a way out of poverty, insecurity and danger are huge. The civil servants who operate the UK asylum system have hugely difficult decisions to make and it is easy to see why there is a 'culture of disbelief' – something which shocks and distresses those who arrive in the UK, particularly if they have indeed escaped from persecution. Amongst those who arrive seeking asylum are people who have been tortured or are the victims of sexual violence and they may well have no evidence other than the scars on their body to prove their claim. When their story is disbelieved and, in some cases they are put in a prison-like detention centre, and when they are faced with return to an oppressive regime, they suffer enormously.

The asylum process causes people to suffer in all sorts of ways. Badly-handled cases leave people with the sense that they have not been able to tell their story; waits of several years before a final decision are still common; the inability to work saps dignity and incentive; symptoms of fear and stress are endemic; without access to cash normal living is impossible; being an asylum seeker becomes a kind of guilty secret. We have in this country a substantial population of refugees whose mental health will never recover from their experience of the UK asylum system. They have been victims twice over.

There is much, much more I could say about the asylum system, but I am using it as an illustration for the way in which justice and compassion interact in our society, sometimes well, and sometimes appalling badly, and for what it means to take the teaching of Jesus seriously. I believe we should be profoundly grateful that the provision of asylum for those who need it is now seen as a matter of justice, a human right, and that this principle is embedded in international law. We should be grateful that, despite the obstacles it puts in people's path, the UK continues to devote considerable resources to providing asylum for those who need it. We can also be grateful that there are legal ways to challenge failures and to force improvement in the system.

Compassion demands, however, that we look at how the system actually works, what it means for people who are caught within it. Compassion begins with time spent listening to another human being and entering into their experience. This is why Jesus highlights the compassion of a father for his lost son; the compassion of a householder who understands what it means not to have enough money to put food on the table for one's family in the evening; the compassion of a Samaritan who stops to find out what the man who has been mugged needs and then takes care of him.

Compassion demands that we listen to what it actually feels like to tell your story in a foreign language to someone in authority with the power to send you back to your own country; what it feels like not to have evidence about what happened to you and to be told you are not 'credible'; to have a lawyer who takes your money and then tells you they cannot take your case; to be put in accommodation in a foreign country miles from anyone you know, to be met with hostility and not to know where to find someone who speaks your own language; to arrive in Britain thinking you are safe at last and then to be put in what you think is a prison, with people who scare you, and to have no possibility of getting out; to suffer flashbacks and not to be able to get help; not to be able to get the medical treatment you know you need; to have no idea how long all this is going on; to be told you are going to have to back to the very place you have fled from; not to want to be in Britain and not to want to be back home. Somehow or other, the workings of 'justice' have to take into account these human realities – and because they are complicated the will to do so is all too often not

there. But justice without compassion is not truly justice. Radical compassion sees through the rhetoric of 'justice' and identifies the injustice that is there. It moves people like you and me to demand change.

Conclusion

My conclusion can be very short. I have tried to suggest the approach Jesus takes to the relation between compassion and justice. I have tried to show that for him compassion trumps a strict or superficial application of the religious rules, and that he accepted the authority of the state provided it did not come between human beings and God.² I took the example of the UK asylum system to show that we do have a system which is grounded in compassion and of that we should be proud. However, I tried also to show that it fails in many ways to provide justice and that those failures should drive us to seek reform, to seek greater justice. At the heart of the Christian faith is the compassion of God for us and the compassion we feel for others. Radical compassion drives us to seek to overturn injustice by every means we can – as the beatitudes say, 'to hunger and thirst for justice'. It does so, not so we can feel better about ourselves, but because as human beings we all need to live in a network of compassionate and just relations, with each other and with our God.

² I have not explored those very limited circumstances where it may be right for a Christian to break the law as I think we are unlikely to face such situations in a democracy like Britain – though it is always possible. In the extreme circumstances of the Nazi tyranny, where Jews and other groups experienced terrible state-sponsored persecution, this became for the churches an ever more pressing question.