

Texts: Luke 15:11-20 and Romans 5:6-11

Sunday 19th May 2019

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We are now part way through our sermon series on Luke chapter 15, and we have been slowing down to really explore what these three parables of Jesus reveal to us of our heavenly Father.

We've seen that Father God loves with a seeking and prodigal love, that we are so precious to God that He seeks us out like a lost coin or sheep, and then in the example of the father and his lost son, we see a God who is extravagantly patient and recklessly generous in love.

We've also asked whether it is possible to hold onto belief in such a good God in light of the brokenness of our world.

To get us into this week's focus, I wonder if you would turn to your neighbour, and try to come up with a working definition for compassion. I'll give you one minute. Go!

(PAUSE)

Compassion has been defined as suffering with someone in their pain and distress. It means to come alongside someone in their suffering and to feel what they feel. It means far more than just pity – it is empathetic love. It involves the engagement of both the heart and the hand – the heart in sharing in another's pain,...

the hand in reaching out to help. Compassion, in short, is about participation, not detachment. It is about actions more than words. It is about ‘suffering love.’

It can be hard to picture compassion sometimes but when we see it, it is so very powerful. **During the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, British athlete Derek Redmond ran in the 400 metres semi-final, which was the fulfilment of a dream for him. But 100 metres into the race he fell on the track, having torn a hamstring. Here is a video of what happened – look out for the moment of compassion.**

(PLAY VIDEO)

What was unknown to most folks at the time, was that the man who helped Derek reach the finish line was his dad, Jim...

His father, seeing his son's distress, came alongside him – Jim refused to let guards deter him, he even pushed one over, because he was driven by compassion, by suffering love, to help his child finish that race.

We read today these words: 'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.' (v20) The father saw the younger son and was filled with compassion for him.

This father had watched his precious child rebel and go off the rails, shaming the father and disappearing off into the sunset, with no intention of ever returning. But every day the father had been looking. Whenever a merchant came into the village, the father would ask,...

‘Have you seen him? Have you seen my son? Have you seen him on your travels, especially in the far country?’

And every time he would see that blank stare, that look which signalled ‘no’. Every day the father lived with the gossip and the rumour-mongering in the village. Every night the father stayed awake and no one ever saw the tears that streamed down his face as he relived the agonising day of his son’s departure. No one saw the heaving of his shoulders as he gave way to quiet grief.

Yet, every day he patiently waited, he kept up hope, sitting on the flat roof of his house, looking towards the horizon. Then, one day, he caught sight of a familiar outline. He rubbed his eyes, blinked several time, and peered again. Could it be? Is it he?

At first the father feels shock, then momentary hesitation, but finally, certainty sets in, as he becomes sure it is his precious child, and with gut-wrenching emotion filling his entire being, the father can't help himself anymore and he runs towards his son.

When we read that one little verse, we almost skip over it – we might be tempted to think, “well of course he did that, that's obvious, who wouldn't run to their child?”

But we need to remember the cultural dynamics at the time when this parable was told. As a general rule, distinguished Middle Eastern patriarchs did not run.

There was a proverb around at the time: ‘A man's manner of walking tells you what he is.’ Children might run; women might run; young men might run...

But not the father of the family, the dignified pillar of the community, the owner of the great estate. He would not pick up his robes and bare his legs like some boy. It was shameful and dishonourable for a man over 30 to be seen running in public, because quite literally you would be revealing your undergarments. No man who held honour highly enough would ever do that.

But this father does. He runs to his son – his feet move in response to his heart, to the deep well of compassion in the bowels of his very being; his love for his child is so deep that he will overcome all embarrassment and social conventions to reach his child.

So, what does Jesus hope to reveal of our heavenly Father in this parable? Well, we are clearly meant to see that our heavenly Father is filled with compassion towards us.

A few weeks ago, we saw that we each are like the younger son, we each have told God that He is as good as dead to us, that we want no part of Him, even though we want all the good stuff He has given us. We considered the agony that God would feel in response to such a rejection, a rejection, which if we suffered it, would result in a temper tantrum and the end of the relationship.

But Jesus is revealing something else entirely – Father God feels such compassion for us that He will pay a price to be reconciled to us. And that very price is summed up for us by the Apostle Paul **in his letter to the Romans:**

‘But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ (Rom. 5:8)

While we were still far off rebels, telling God to drop dead, He literally did – He laid down His life to make it possible for us to be forgiven. At the very moment when we were furthest away, the Father took the initiative. Even though we have sinned by rejecting Him, the Father decided to act. The justice of God said that human beings must experience the consequences of their rejection of God, and so experience separation from Him eternally. But the love of God said that this could not be the end of the story. So, out of this tension in the heart of God, the Father acted in history - He showed His great compassion for us by sending His one and only Son to die the death that we deserved...

Our heavenly Father, is a God who runs to rescue us, He is truly the God who saves, for at the Cross we see God's love come running towards us, with outstretched arms, defusing the power of guilt and shame in any son or daughter who will return home.

If you feel far away from God, then remember the Father whom Jesus reveals in this parable – the Father who is waiting for you to come home. God's heart is not filled with anger and hatred towards you, He loves you with a suffering love, with such compassion that He died in the person of His Son to bring you home, He is for you and His arms are opened wide. I asked a few weeks ago, friends, but just in case anyone was not here to hear it, I'll ask it again – do you need to come home to God?

To be a Christian, is to come home to God – where God becomes the centre of your life, such that you build your life upon Him and He shapes your choices, your values, your priorities – that’s when you know you live for God, that’s when you know you’ve come home. That’s true repentance.

And God is lovingly waiting for us, my friends – if you haven’t returned to God, will you come home to God? If you’re unsure how to begin that journey home, then come speak with me after the service, and you can come home to God today.

But for those of us who have returned home, then there is the call of God upon our lives to grow up in the family likeness and take up the family business: we are to grow in the compassion of God and take up the reconciling work of God.

I know that you are a socially compassionate church – I have seen and felt it personally. I have seen you give of your time and of your money and of your love to help folks in desperate need and real sadness and brokenness. I am not speaking into these aspects of our congregational life, for there you do reflect the love of God.

But Jesus did not tell this parable to challenge us to be more loving in practical ways – that’s the parable of the Good Samaritan. No, Jesus told this parable in the context of helping His listeners understand the Father’s desire to be reconciled to us. In this instance, to reflect the compassion of God, is to take up the family business and help people come back into relationship with God, to come back home to God; that’s what Jesus was about here, that’s how the compassion of God was being displayed.

So, let me ask you, **brothers and sisters in Christ: will we get out of the stands and get alongside others to help them finish the race? Like Derek Redmond's father, will we get out of the comfort of the pew, or our homes, or our church groups, and will we break with convention, expectation, or even political correctness so as to come alongside others in compassion with the Good News of Jesus Christ? Will we wave off embarrassment, excuses of age or ability, or the apathy within our hearts and get out into our parish with the Good News of these very parables?**

I realise it's not easy; I am not a natural evangelist either. Every time I stand up here and ask you to come home to God, I don't do it well and every fibre of my being cringes.

But I know I've to do it because I know God wants as many as possible to come home to Him.

So, today I want to share with you in these closing moments, two initiatives to help us grow and show the compassion of God in this particular way.

The first is the prayer initiative you will have found in your news sheet. (READ SHEET) (WATCH VIDEO)

So, that's the first initiative. As it happens, the time for Thy Kingdom Come, comes right before we are seeking to have our weekend of invitation here at Brightons Church on Sunday 9th June...

The idea with this initiative is for us to invite someone to church that weekend. To help with this, we've produced a simple invitation that will go out with the next copy of the Bright Lights magazine. The elders' hope is that those who don't regularly attend might be encouraged to come back. But also, that those of us who do come regularly, might take the invitation and use it to invite someone else along on the 9th June. This might be a neighbour, family member, colleague at work.

I realise that this is a big step for a lot of us – it's a big step for me. So, **that's why we are coupling it with prayer – because we will never invite someone without deep compassion and conviction, and really, that only comes about as the Holy Spirit works in us and we talk with God in prayer about our fears, our hopes, our need for help.**

So, please consider joining in prayer and using your invitation to share the compassion of our heavenly Father with those who are in your life, and invite them to not only to come to church, but to come home to God.

Let us pray.