People of faith can offer gifts to people who are suffering

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Pentecost + 17– Lam 1 1-6 3 19-26 , 2nd Tim 1 1-14, Lk 17 1-10

There’s deep lament in our readings from the Hebrew Scriptures today. We heard the lament of the holy city emptied of her people. Then we sang the lament of that people; people made homeless by an occupying military force. Singing those words brings a voice into our bodies that speaks for around 130 million displaced people around the world today – six times Australia’s national population.

We join with observant people of every faith in praying for their healing, for justice, and for their return to a safe home. The point of our sharing these laments together is not to seek to apportion blame. God knows who is blameworthy, and they will answer to God. But as we wait for that day, there are immediate needs – and the first of those needs is compassion. Everything else proceeds from that.

?What’s meant to happen for us as we listen to the cries of grief, of loneliness, of violation and betrayal, and as we watch the total breakdown of entire peoples? ?What’s meant to happen for us as we hear these words from Lamentations, or sing them together? They call us to offer compassion. We are called to step out of our usual multitude of preoccupations about the bits and pieces of our own lives. Instead, we are to learn how to enter into lives that have been broken into bits and pieces – lives that may never come together again. We are to be what those people need most desperately; to be compassionate, present, loving and dependable.

It’s a very uncomfortable place to enter. It demands a huge amount from us. Our instinct is to appeal to legal systems to defend the abused; to blame the abuser; to confront lies and set the record straight. That is to seek to work through an organisation – work remotely from a position of strength and control. And there’s a place for that.

But if you listen to the voice of the suffering one in the passage we sang as today’s Psalm, it’s not the strong, vindicating agency that the abused need first. Their first cry is to the God of steadfast love whose mercies never come to an end – the one whose consoling arms of love they long for right now. And that needs to come primarily from people of faith. In my experience, compassion is *the* life-changing gift that people of various faiths can offer. Compassion brings hope and restores worth to those who’ve had their hope and their sense of worth torn from them.

Being close to such pain is very difficult; especially when you feel as if you have nothing practical to offer. But please never underestimate the healing that your compassionate presence can bring. What you are doing there is offering something from beyond any of us: the steadfast love of the Lord that never ceases; whose mercies never come to an end. Believe that – or ask God to help you believe it – and your presence and compassion can be God’s gift in a time of need.

We gather here each week to be built up in that commitment to compassion. It’s not as though we get baptised and confirmed, then, like a fully wound-up toy, dispense faith and hope and love for the rest of our lives. Last week, we thought about regeneration. Today we heard Paul write to Timothy about rekindling the gift of God within him; about a gift that passes down through generations. That’s essential.

A friend sent me a study last week which examined the way people of faith influence our nation’s social cohesion. One of the findings was that *participation in religious communities*

can foster traits like compassion and forgiveness, which in turn enhance feelings of respect and being valued by others. Receiving spiritual support from fellow believers is also associated with higher self-worth and respect. Believing in a loving or supportive God, frequent prayer, and strong congregational ties have also been linked to a propensity of individuals to 'find meaning in life'. https://www.scanloninstitute.org.au/publications/insights/social-cohesion-insights-08-religion-and-social-cohesion-in-australia

People of faith can offer those gifts to people who are suffering because we've experienced God's love and support for ourselves. We can share that hope and affirm a broken person's worth because we know it's true. And we do that; people of faith do this. The study looked at *participation in social groups, and unpaid volunteer work. And the participation score for people of faith was significantly higher than all other groups – much higher than those who said they were not religious at all. Research has shown that faith is associated with higher rates of volunteering, charitable giving, and involvement in civic organisations.*

Our belonging to a community of faith makes a difference. We can offer compassion because we experience it from God through each other. With the home-base of a community of love like this, this gift is regenerated in us so that we might offer compassion we could never offer alone to the wounded ones God loves. Amen