

# Compassion underpins the Church's healing and teaching ministries.

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*Look in the mirror and find Jesus, a goldsmith, purifying us – the gold – with fire, crucible, and skimmer. Skimming over and over until his face is reflected perfectly.*

Today's Gospel passage is startling for what gets left out – two iconic miracles; Jesus feeding the five thousand, and Jesus walking on the water. Today, we only read the verses before the miracles, and then the verses straight after them. So what we're looking at today is like a frame without a picture in it.

The frame is Jesus' compassion – as ever, for the crowds, but first, his compassion for the apostles. They've worked so hard they haven't even had time to eat. So he took them away in their boat to escape the constant demands of the crowds.

One lesson many followers of Jesus have drawn from this is that discipleship must balance times of service with time for physical and spiritual renewal – food, rest and prayer. St Vincent de Paul said, *Be careful to preserve your health. It's a trick of the devil, which he employs to deceive good souls, to incite them to do more than they are able, in order that they may no longer be able to do anything.* Another interpretation might be that the disciples learn about compassion by being on the receiving end of it. I think we need both insights.

Jesus took his apostles away in their boat to get away from

the constant demands of the crowds. No chance of that. People guessed where they were going and ran on ahead of them. A great crowd had gathered to meet the boat by the time it landed. What's a reasonable reaction to this? What should Jesus have done? He and the disciples had every reason to be dismayed. They hadn't eaten, and they'd needed rest even before bringing the boat here.

We'd expect tired, hungry people to respond with frustration to this unexpected, extra demand on their ebbing energy. Mark doesn't tell us how the disciples responded; maybe Jesus did let them rest. But he does tell us that Jesus has compassion on the crowd, because they were "like sheep without a shepherd".

*Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.* The theologian Douglas Hall sees in this verse an answer to two huge questions. The first question; *how does God view the world?* And the other, *how does God want us to view the world?* He says that the answer to both is to be found in this verse.

How does God see the world? Like Jesus does; with compassion. And how does God want us to see the world? Like Jesus does; with compassion.

This might seem pretty straightforward; almost so obvious that it doesn't warrant talking about. Except that it's not just a feeling that Jesus had on a few occasions when he was confronted with people who were suffering badly. It's his life and death witness. Compassion demands everything. It's much more than just pity or sympathy. *Pity is something you can manage from afar – at a once-remove! Not compassion. You do not have compassion, really, unless you suffer with [them].\**

Compassion means knowing the same experience as another person who is suffering – suffering it with them. And in this morning's Gospel, we can see that it also meant Jesus deciding

to put aside his own comfort so that he could care for the needs of that great crowd – and of course, that other crowd later who greeted him at Gennesaret after the two miracles.

So it's a frame we've been given in today's Gospel – no picture, but a frame of compassion. This frame calls us to look where the picture would have been, and see ourselves, as in a mirror, and ask what we would have done.

Compassion – the wounded healer – underpins the Church's healing and teaching service. It makes them authentic. What we say and do are integrated when we follow Jesus, and he calls us into the danger area of compassion. Can we see ourselves willingly entering the experience of those Jesus sends us to serve? Jesus came to seek us out. We know what that compassion has done for us. The call is to offer that gift to the next one we meet. It's painful to enter that space, and yet it transforms the world – and us – like nothing else.

What about that image of the goldsmith skimming off the dross?

It's one picture of the pain, the cost of being compassionate. It hurts. It wouldn't be real if it didn't. But it transforms us with every decision we make to share someone else's pain. It cleanses us of the dross – the fear, the self-centredness, the deliberate blindness and so many other barriers we have to risking compassion. But with every new decision for costly care, we come closer to truly reflecting in our own being the image and likeness of God in Jesus. Amen

\* Hall, D. J. (2009). Theological Perspective on Mark 6:30–34, 53–56. *Feasting on the Word: Year B* (Vol. 3, p.