

Compassion and Calling

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[0 : 00] Okay, so because this evening was meant to be Callum and Sam 125 and it was just this morning that we had to change things, I didn't prepare anything new, I didn't have time, probably just as well.

But so just to put you in the picture, I'm going to preach from what I preached at the opening sermon of the General Assembly this week.

As a retiring moderator you have to open the proceedings with a sermon. So I'm sorry, you're getting that, okay? I've slightly adapted it and changed it, hopefully.

If you were there on Monday night, I'm scanning around, there maybe wasn't many. You may have of course watched it on the internet if you were a really sad kind of individual and there anything else in your life to do.

But if you did then you have my permission to sleep. If you didn't and you sleep then I'll just call you out, okay? So you can test me on that one.

[1 : 09] So it was related to the leaders of the church, obviously the ministers and elders, but it's equally relevant in many ways and can be relevant to, very much so, to everyone in the church maybe with specific reference to leaders as it was, but I'm broadening it out as much as I can.

It's just the last few verses of that chapter, chapter 9, verse 38, when Jesus saw the crowds, he'd compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few, therefore, pre-earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

So, you know, there's that ongoing thing about Christian lives and being in the church and the toughness sometimes of belonging to a community, the toughness of being part of a church, church life is really tough, but also just the reality of being Christians in our lives.

We can, as leaders and as church people, as Christians, we ourselves can be confused and discouraged and disappointed by what's happening spiritually, maybe sometimes focusing that on God, but often on other people.

[2 : 25] But we know that we can discourage and confuse and disappoint other people. We know the institution of the church has a great history of discouraging and disappointing people, and yet we seek constantly as a community of worshipers, as a family together, as people who love Jesus Christ and who love worshiping Jesus Christ together.

We want to recognize and remind ourselves of the importance of our responsibility towards one another and our responsibility to encourage one another in community against the rampant individualism of the day and the generation which we live, where we're tempted to say, well, we don't need the church, I don't need anyone else, I'll just live my own Christian life quietly and peacefully without considering anyone else.

But we recognize that if we're following Jesus, we need to seek His example and follow the kind of calling and the attitude of mind that He had Himself as He lived among people.

So we're all living among people, and so we learn, I think, from Jesus' example, and we hope to do that. So just in an aside, before going into this little passage, I think just to remind, as I reminded the wider church, I remind myself and yourselves of two things very briefly, all the time.

This is an aside from the aside. There was a Malawian preacher at the assembly, and he did that great African welcome, he said, God is good, I can't really say all the time, and then he says all the time, and I can't really say God is good.

[4 : 16] So I'm talking about all the time again. Okay, that's just an aside. All the time, God is good, but all the time, in the same way, we need God's protection, don't we?

In our Christian lives, we need God's protection. You come this evening, and we all come and we recognize our need as Christians of God's protection. We need to be spiritually sharp and alert, dependent, prayerful and vigilant.

So it's always important for us to be listening to the great shepherd of our sheep. This is a passage where Jesus reveals what he's like as a shepherd, and it's important always to be listening to the great shepherd of his sheep and coming under his protection as the great shepherd who wants us to be under his wing, as it were, and who wants us to take the toughness of our Christian lives and come to him for protection from the destroyer.

There's always a destroyer of our souls, and he comes in many guises, do we know that, don't we? So we need his protection, that's an aside, but we also, as a second aside, we need to keep our focus.

And going back to the gospels is good for that, you know? It's good to keep our focus, and not feel bad about being stripped back to gospel basics.

[5 : 35] I was focusing that for, I guess, our leaders, but much for ourselves as well. It's easy to focus on the church as an institution, as an end in itself, that you come together and you lead the church and blah, blah, blah.

But we can absolutely lose priority, and we can lose the significance of where we're going. And it's very easy to do that as Christians as well in our own lives.

So it's good for us to be stripped back to Jesus and to gospel basics and to ask ourselves, you know, what is it that takes up our energy and our time spiritually while the world and our friends, as Dave was saying, perish and as we get older?

What is it that is important to us? What is it that we get excited about? What's precious to us? What do we get worked up about in the church, maybe?

Some ridiculous things, but just generally in our lives, it's easy to get sidetracked by silly issues, by secondary matters, by hobby horses, or matters that are really insignificant in terms of the kingdom and the kingdom value.

[6 : 38] So it's important to be protected and it's important to keep our focus. And in that light, I want to come back to what Jesus is saying here and focus on two positive things that we can take, I hope we can take away from this evening for our own lives, because this is Jesus among people, okay?

Now, you'll all be among people, we'll all be among people in the days that lie ahead. And my prayer for us, for all of us, is that we mimic the attitude and the invitation or the command of Jesus that He gives us in this passage.

So there's two things I'm going to speak about briefly. First is compassion and the second is calling, okay? And we can relate to all of these things, as we think of the great shepherd of our sheep.

So Jesus Christ, when He saw all the crowds, He had compassion on them for they were harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd. Jesus saw the people that He was around, Jesus the Son of God, Jesus the perfect Son, and He was moved deep down into His guts.

That's what it says. That's where the word compassion means in the original. He was so moved by what He saw. And you know that feeling, don't you, when you're so moved by something that either provokes you to tears or it provokes your guts to turn, it gives you butterflies in your stomach because there's that unmistakable link between body and soul in our lives.

[8 : 10] And anything that affects us powerfully in our hearts, in our being, affects us physically as well. And Jesus' spiritual concern for the people had this physical effect on them that His compassion for them was gut-wrenching.

That's really how we could paraphrase that. Gut-wrenching compassion for the people around Him. He looked around and He saw them spiritually and thought, these guys have no spiritual leadership. They've got no one looking after them. They've got no one to follow. Their spiritual leaders have abandoned them and have neglected them.

And that's what He's, it's almost like He's revisiting God's complaint in Ezekiel's Day, to the people, leaders of Ezekiel's Day. It's a really powerful section.

Ezekiel 34, you have not strengthened the weak, you've not healed the sick, bandaged the injured, brought back the strays or sought the lost, but with force and harshness you've ruled over them.

[9 : 09] They were scattered because they had no shepherd and they became food for every wild beast. My sheep scattered, wandered over all the mountains on an every high hill. My sheep were scattered over the entire face of the earth because no one was looking or searching for them.

That's the picture that Jesus is reminding Himself as He looks around at these people that He was seeing. There was no compassion for them.

The religious leaders were harsh and authoritarian and He saw and recognized that the people around Him spiritually were, they were weak and they were straying and they were lost souls. That's what Jesus sees. And it's important, I think, when we think of other Christians and we think of the Christian church and maybe even when we think of the leadership as well, and I do wonder about this sometimes about the whole makeup of church and what it's like, that what we tend to think and what we tend to do when we come together in churches, everything seems to be together. Everything seems to be, or that everyone else seems to have things together when we come to church. And when we see everyone, we see people who are pristine Christians, who are doing great as Christians.

[10:33] And you maybe come into that situation and you're afraid of their judgment, you're afraid that they will look at you and think, well, you haven't got your life together and you don't seem to be doing so well.

And you sense a lack of interest in your struggles and your battles because you feel that everyone else has their life together. It's a great challenge to us that we don't look at people that way but we look at people the way Jesus looked at them.

And so I would challenge us all to see the vitality of compassion in our Christian lives. If I was asked the question, what is it that any church or St. Columbus or any Christian was one of the most important characters, I know it's difficult to list, grade characteristics, this kind of false division in a sense.

But I would be hard pressed to go beyond compassion as a tremendous, a Christ-centered compassion for people. There's a solid, powerful picture in the Old Testament of the compassion of God for his people in Ezekiel 16.

I've often used it here. You know it because it's one of my favourites, that a newborn baby, we were praying for the unborn child today this morning. But there's a great picture in Ezekiel 16 of a newborn baby just thrown out into the desert, not even washed, covered in blood, bloody newborn baby left to die.

[12:00] And God sees that newborn baby girl and he picks her up and he washes her and he clothes her and he feeds her and he looks after her.

And she grows up in his home and then he clothes her like a queen and he marries her and she becomes his bride. And there's an incredible, compassionate picture of, this is how God sees his people.

And of course in the New Testament you have Corey's favourite picture of the prodigal son, the prodigal father, more than the prodigal son, great pictures of compassion.

And why is it such a good characteristic for us? Because it reveals that we understand, as we come together, we understand our own hearts.

And therefore we understand the hearts of others. We understand how compassionate the great shepherd of the sheep has been for us. And we know what it's like to be helpless and harassed and dejected and deserted.

[13:03] And so we, having received that, live that. We live that with others. We lead and we live with compassion in all that we do as a people, as a church.

And we seek to show the same love and patience that's been shown to us, to others, kind, generous, understanding, empathetic. That's the kind of discipleship we're looking for in St. Columbus.

We're not machines. We're not Christian machines. We're not Christian terminators. We are people, we're not servant fodder to keep the institution of the church and its programs going.

Our job, our work as leaders in the church is to support, is to love, to equip, to train and show compassion to each other.

I think that, you know, if I was to go tomorrow, I think if St. Columbus had that as a hallmark, I'd be pretty happy. It was known as a compassionate church, not organized compassion, not institutionalized compassion, but it stemmed naturally from our understanding of the gospel, that preaching you'd heard week to week, drove you to Jesus and drove you to your knees to that place where you have that compassion for others.

[14:23] And not in a dramatic way, but just in an ordinary way, the people sitting next to you, the people that maybe are isolated or whatever it might be. You see, because we're in the people

business.

We're in the people business because we're about God's business. So you know, the church doesn't exist, the people don't exist to keep the church good. It's not about structures and position and power and uniformity and procedures and legislation.

All these things I rattled off at the assembly, however important they might be. We are not primarily heresy hunters, moralists, hermits, or dictator, sorry, I'm going into assembly mode here.

But we can all get sidetracked, can't we, into these things. We can get sidetracked into things that are not about people, and people can be a kind of added, frustrating extra that just cause difficulty for us.

But as we understand Jesus Christ and what He's done for us, and this great love for a world that rejects Him, then it helps us as He has loved us so much to reach down and save us.

[15:34] Then we can show compassion to the world in which we live. And as under shepherds, as leaders, we need to be compassionate to. And you need to pray for the elders and deacons and leaders in the church here to be compassionate, because compassion is hugely significant for us.

If we don't have it, we've lost our connection with Jesus. And for all of us, we need the compassion that is strong enough to push us out of our comfort zones to the edges of our experience to save the lost.

Jesus speaks about that, doesn't he, in this passage that, you know, they were harassed and helped us in Ezekiel, rather, reaching out for the lost. You need to be willing, you need to be willing, and I need to be willing to go to the cliff edges for the lost, the people that you know, the people that you know are on the edge of a lost eternity, and you have that opportunity to be compassionate, to that prayerful concern and loving and long urgency for them.

It's good to be moved to the very, I guess, even moved right into our guts for the condition of people and for their spiritual lostness.

And as we know grace, it enables us to be compassionate. I just can't dovetail the idea of someone who knows a lot about Jesus but who is not compassionate.

[17:09] I just don't get it. I know we all fail and fall, and I know I drastically fall short, but there has to be the two coming together, doesn't it, as we understand ourselves.

So compassion, the second thing briefly is calling. Jesus moves on to say to His disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore, pre-earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.

So He's changing His metaphor, and He's moving from sheep, He's moving from the shepherd's field to the grain field, as it were.

And this is not the parable of the sower, this is the parable of the, or the illustration anyway of the harvest. I think sometimes we like the parable of the sower more than the challenge of the harvest, because we like the thought of being able to sow, of being able to maybe share the word, and we can leave the harvest maybe to others because we are not seeing the harvest, maybe.

Maybe that's why. But I think what's clear in God's word, and what's clear here and elsewhere, maybe particularly in John chapter 4, He talks about sowing and reaping together.

[18:28] So the sowing and the reaping both rely on God's sovereignty, and we are called, as Jesus says in John 4, to be engaged in both, both sowing and harvesting.

And the great thing what He reminds us here is the harvest, He's the Lord of the harvest, it's His harvest, a really comforting, what a great relief.

We don't need to worry about the harvest, we don't need to worry about how many souls under our watch come to faith, because that's His work. He gives us, the harvest is plentiful, in other words, the opportunity is there, the people are there, the need is there, we are to be out among them.

He will give the harvest and we rejoice in that. In this life, in this life which is both battles and blessings, which we know, it's also at times there's weeping and there's rejoicing, there's times when it's a struggle and there's times when it's a blessing.

There's a time when not only should we be plowing the hard ground spiritually, but we should be harvesting and seeing souls saved. We should be seeing people coming to faith and He says, that is exactly what I'm promising you.

[19:43] I'm promising you, God's promise is this morning, and the faith to believe in Him like Abraham, and our expectations should be both, because we have bad news, but maybe we dwell so much in the bad news we forget the good news, we forget that Jesus has come to save people

and that there is a harvest, and maybe we need, maybe particularly in our own context, to change our expectation levels to make them greater, and not just to analyze the missionary world that we see and say, well, God's working in the east, and God's working in the southern hemisphere, and He's working in South America, and many thousands are coming to faith.

He's moved on from the west, but that's God's business. But let us still have an expectation and pray for the harvest.

Going and reaping rely on God's sovereignty, and we call out to Him in His sovereignty to fulfill His promise. But we call out in prayer, because prayer and work is our work.

We do both together. There's simply no getting away in God's calling to us, not only to be compassionate, but to be workers. The harvest is plenty, but the laborers are few, therefore ask, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest.

So, you know, there's no getting away from our significant dependence on God as a church, as Christians. Now, I know, I hope none of you have any problems with strategy or planning or vision casting or professionalism and expertise, these are all great things.

[21 : 27] But they're all to be done in the shadow of the Almighty. They're all to be done in dependence on Him. We hold loosely to these things, we don't depend on them, but they're not alternative wisdom, but we do all these things in expectation of God to work.

But work, we must. Work you must as a Christian, because it's a great honour. It's a great privilege. Grace doesn't make us lazy. Compassion doesn't make us lazy Christians. It makes us willing to sacrifice and serve and follow an honour, because it's a joy, because we're only here for a few years.

I know the young guys here don't think that. I know you think you'll live forever, and that's great. It is tremendous to be young, but it was only yesterday I was your age, just yesterday, just 24 hours ago.

And now look how old and decrepit I am. And yet we don't have, we have such a short time here, and time isn't guaranteed, and He wants us to work in His kingdom and work for His kingdom.

[22 : 36] There's a very famous quote, I think it's famous, which says, nobody said on their deathbed I wish I'd spent more time in the office.

You've probably heard that. That nobody wishes they spent more time in the office when it comes to end their lives.

I can imagine every grace-touched believer when they meet with Jesus on that last great day as believers. I think what they will say is, I wish I'd spent more time serving Jesus better.

Not to earn anything from Him, not in some kind of legalistic way, but He was worth. My goodness, He was worth giving my all for.

He was worth me spending and being spent. He was worth my soul. He was worth my obedience. He was worth my giving, body and soul, so that I compassionally was moved in my guts to see the lost and to serve Him with compassion.

[23 : 44] So prayer and work is our work, and we are called to be laborers. And therefore I close with a challenge that I've often made here, and I have to make to myself often.

I think we're the answer to our prayer. You know, the prayer is given here. He says, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.

So who's the answer to that prayer, as God sends out laborers? He's not angels He sends out. He doesn't send a host from heaven down, that we sit back and say, oh, great, there's the laborers.

We are the laborers. So it's a dangerous prayer, and sometimes it's a dangerous thing to pray, a good thing. But a dangerous thing, and we are the answer to this prayer.

So it's an acknowledgement of the way God works, and we are therefore His mission workers. It's our great commission. We are purveyors of good news.

[24 : 46] That's our task, our calling. So I'm glad to be pushing an agenda in the assembly of our church for church planting, for that great model of reaching out and planting churches and saving the lost.

And sometimes astonishes may be where people are cynical or disinterested in that as if it's some kind of passing phase.

To we're mission workers, we reach out with the gospel. We equip workers to mission, as calling as leaders, as church ministers, as to equip the saints, what to do to be workers, that we live out and that we share our faith.

People generally speaking are not going to come into church to hear the gospel. They think, oh, I need to hear the gospel today. I don't feel, I know very much. I think I'll go to church. Now that might happen in the odd decade, but it generally doesn't happen.

It usually is people will be provoked to have no knowledge by your life on the front line as you courageously, boldly, humbly and compassionately live out your life and share your faith.

[26 : 02] And people will say, well, I want to think about going to the place they go on a Sunday and worship because I see something in their life as front line workers that they wouldn't call it, of course.

And I'm interested in that. So you're in the harvest. You're out there where the people are. Where this great harvest is, and we're, I am, of course, called to do the same.

The opportunities aren't so easy when you're in full time ministry, but we're all called to do that, workers. And we're workers together. It's not, therefore, prayer and say for the Lord of the harvest to send out a combine harvester with one driver who will do all the work and plow thousands and thousands of acres of field or harvest them all.

It's not that picture that we have. We have a picture, a gradient, a rural picture of many, many workers heading out to take in the harvest.

It's not the job of a professional. It's the job of all of us together. The power of community. And I do think today, probably more than ever, it is the work of community.

[27 : 16] It's the work of church together, of people together, sharing their faith, living out their faith, and inviting others into that community of people, then into their community of worshiping.

And in answer to our prayers, not only do we do it together, but we do it urgently. Therefore send out laborers into his harvest.

You can't wait a year or two years and have set up a committee to look into whether we should have more laborers or less, what part of the field we should go into, because the harvest will be rotten.

You know, there's a sense in which Jesus uses this picture because there's an urgency. The harvest is ready now. It's not going to be in two years' time there's going to be a revival of the Holy Spirit's work and we'll wait until that time and get ready.

It's now we're going to be living. We might not be here in two years' time. So it's now. We can't wait. It's an acceptable time. And so there's that grace. And I do think probably all of us, and I absolutely include myself in this, we've lost a sense of urgency.

[28 : 25] I don't know why that might be the case. Maybe it's modernity or science or the feeling that we're in control and that we'll carry on and there's plenty of time. It's okay.

There's plenty of time. We're not in a part of the world where maybe our lives are in danger every day or there's poverty or famine or floods or dangers and persecution.

Someone was saying at the assembly actually that 80% of the world's Christians are being persecuted. We're in the absolute minority of being the 20% are not.

And that's an unusual situation. And maybe that's partly why urgency has gone, but we can ask and pray for the Holy Spirit to inculcate in us a daily urgency about our calling.

About our calling to be harvesters in school, university, in the vet practice, in the home, your neighborhood, that we have this great calling to fuse the two things together, don't we?

[29 : 35] Compassion and calling. We see them both. And it's our identity. It is to shape all that we are and all that we do.

And I think the compassion that not only we show, but I hope the compassion that we receive from our fellow Christians is and from the Christian community is what helps us to carry on because it's tough.

And we don't need to be beaten up and we don't need to be exposed to our failure. But I hope that when you rise from the Lord's day with God's people, the compassion you've been shown and the encouragement and the building up helps you to go on and fulfill your calling.

I'm sure this is a cultural thing as well. A couple of weeks ago we had two sets of American groups here where they get American group in the morning from a church somewhere.

I can't remember where it was in the morning. They came unexpected. In the evening we had the church from Orlando that support Esk Valley. And a lot of people said to me, particularly those in leadership from this end, Tom and other elders and others, what they said was how encouraging and reaffirming and positive these people were.

[30 : 59] And they, I mean it's cultural in many ways, but it was just kind of felt good after being in their company. You know, we weren't looking for your faults.

We weren't looking for your failures. They were looking to pick out something that they can encourage you with and build you up. And that's a great quality. We're not great at that in Scotland, but it's a great quality.

It's a great Christian quality and it's a quality of compassion. And may it be that we are encouragers and those who are compassionate towards one another, recognizing our own hearts and the hearts of others and therefore spirit filled and enabled to fulfill our calling.

And if you don't know Jesus, He's the great shepherd of the sheep. You should know Him and you should come to know Him tonight if you don't.

Let's bow our heads and pray, Lord God, help us to live for you and live in your name. Help us to mimic your compassion, having received it and knowing our undeserving nature.

[32 : 12] Help us to recognize that we're not called to change people or breathe spiritual life into them.

That is your work. It's your harvest. You are the Lord, but you do choose to use us and we long to be used and we ask for forgiveness when we're not interested or we think it's someone else's job or the ministers or something.

Help us to know and see that you have empowered and also privileged us to be your workers. And help us be with everyone here tonight, remember their colleagues at work, their friends, maybe their husbands or wives or children, their fellow students, fellow people in school, their neighbors who they may be praying for and seeking an opportunity to witness to.

Remember our own congregation, those who are struggling, those who don't want to be part of the community because they feel judged or they feel isolated or unworthy.

Why ever they should feel that, we don't know. Be with those who would love to be with us very physically and publicly here in church, but who can't either in work or health reasons or age.

[33 : 32] Or maybe be compassionate and caring and interested and willing to serve and help us to fulfill our calling, we ask. In Jesus' name, amen.