

The Compassion of Christ

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you've closed your Bibles, if you would turn back to Matthew chapter 15. If you're here this morning, we look to verses 21 to 28 and we're going to try and finish the chapters together for a few moments this evening.

And I think it is fair to say, we began to touch on this a little bit this morning, that there's very little in our generation that we dislike quite as much as we dislike prejudice and discrimination.

People one of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads like this, all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

And so when the police in a particular country are seen to profile people on the basis of their race, or when a company is seen to discriminate against people on the grounds of their gender or their religion, there is uproar in our day, and rightly so.

All human beings are made in the image of God, and as such, all are worthy of equal respect and dignity. My dictionary defines prejudice as dislike, hostility or unjust behavior, deriving from preconceived and unfounded opinions.

[1 : 18] And you can be sure that God hates all such prejudice. And that's why the text that we studied this morning sticks in the throat of some people, because in it Jesus himself seems to show a kind of prejudice.

He was said, if you glance back up to verse 24, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. It's not right, he said in verse 26, to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.

The children in that verse are God's historic people, the Jews, and the dogs is a reference to the Gentiles. And so even though Jesus ends up healing the daughter of that Gentile woman, there is this suggestion there that any non-Jewish Christians will somehow always be second class citizens in the kingdom of God, that will only ever be dogs.

The best we would ever get from God are a few crumbs. Now I suspect that as you came to church this evening, you probably didn't come feeling insecure, or any of the non-Jews amongst us at least, that you didn't come feeling as though it's slightly insecure, as though you don't enjoy the same spiritual privileges as any Jewish Christians here.

It doesn't tend to be a big issue for us. But it's worth saying that back at the time that Matthew was writing, it really was a very big deal. In fact, the relationship between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians was one of the two or three biggest issues that the New Testament church ever had to deal with.

[2 : 56] And certainly we know that some Jewish Christians looked down on the Christians from other nations and treated them like lesser members of God's people.

Christian yes, but not quite in the same league as us. Well, we don't know how much Matthew's readers were thinking that, or if ever they tried to use the passage this morning to justify their prejudice.

But if ever they did, then just reading on into our verses tonight would have pulled the rug out from under their feet. It's big message is that Jesus is a man for all the world.

There's two parts to the passage. You'll have swatted that even as Derek read it. First you get these healings in verses 29 to 31, and then there's the feeding in 32 to 39. But both have the same purpose.

Both are there to teach us that Jesus' goal, his purpose is to lavish his salvation blessing on people from every land and tribe and tongue.

[3 : 58] So we're going to look first at what I'm calling the miracles on the Mount. The miracles on the Mount, and it's there in verses 29 to 31. Let me read them again. Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee.

Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others and laid them at his feet.

And he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing, and they praised the God of Israel.

I don't know if we've got any geographers in this evening. My old boss was a geographer. We always used to tease him for not really ever studying a proper subject at school or university. But we noticed this morning geography has a place when you come to read the Bible, because whenever the Bible writers point out where stuff is happening, it's for a reason.

Throughout this second half of Matthew 15, the geography is one of the big players on the scene. So up in verse 21, we saw that Jesus was in the region of Tyre and Sidon.

[5 : 06] It's like he was playing in a way fixture, going away from Jewish, safe Jewish territory, and into the non-Jewish lands. And now again in verse 29, we're told that he's up in the hills by the edge of the Sea of Galilee.

And it gets a bit technical here for a while, because at the end of verse 39, we're then told that he needed a boat trip to get back to the vicinity of Magadan. Now what that means is that our passage is set on the non-Jewish on the eastern side of Galilee.

Or in other words, once again, this is Jesus on an overseas mission trip among Gentile people. And that makes what happens next absolutely incredible.

The last time that Jesus was up on a mountainside in Matthew's Gospel, he delivered the sermon on the mount. And we kind of expect that something exciting might be about to happen. And this time, we get the miracles on the mount.

And it must have been an astonishing spectacle as this vast crowd of people approached Jesus from all sides, bringing with them people suffering from every different kind of ailment.

[6 : 15] And you can imagine the scene if you're a Hollywood director and you're turning it into a film. Here's a man being carried up the hillside because he can't walk properly. And the lads carrying him have to stop every few steps for breath because it's a struggle to get him to Jesus.

Here's a blind woman being gently guided over the stones and hope that she doesn't stumble by her grandchildren. Here are the crippled, the mute.

Here are many others. And the verse says they were laid at the feet of Jesus. Actually, the word's a bit more urgent than that. It's a bit more like they were thrown down at the feet of Jesus.

There is a sense of desperation in the air. Every other hope is gone. This preacher from Galilee is the only hope. They've obviously heard, though, of the powers of Jesus.

And maybe until now, they thought that his kindness was for the Jews alone. But now he's on their turf, and so this is their one chance.

[7 : 20] And those last four words of verse 30 tell a thousand different stories. As one by one, Jesus worked his way through the crowds and he healed them.

I was thinking about the impact of that single day of Jesus' ministry on those people. Even being a mum and your child has grown up and can't speak.

And then you take him to meet Jesus. And for the very first time, you get to hear your child's voice. Imagine being a husband who's mute.

And after you've met Jesus for the very first time, you're able to say those three little words to your wife, I love you. What if you were blind and you'd never before actually seen the face of your best mate?

You've done that thing of trying to work out what it might look like by putting your hands on the face and feeling out the different features. But on that day, you get to see them smile for the first time.

[8 : 28] Well, you think of the difference that Jesus made to the life of the lame. But no wheelchair has to get around in those days. No equal opportunities, employment possibilities, but now they could walk around.

They could run around in the park with their kids. You think of the difference all of those healings would have made to the people who'd been caring for those guys for many years, no doubt.

The sheer naked power of Jesus is amazing and transforming. But the thing that makes this little passage in Matthew unique is not what Jesus is doing.

Because actually Jesus had performed mass healings like this a bunch of times before in the Gospels. But what is unique is that the people who are benefiting from these miracles this time aren't Jewish people, but Gentiles.

And it's worth saying that this little specific list of miracles is not random. There's a passage back in Isaiah 35 verses 3 to 7.

[9 : 30] You might want to look at it later. Isaiah 35 that lists these exact miracles as things that God himself will do when he comes to earth in the person of his king to reveal his glory and to bring salvation to his people.

And so by repeating these miracles now for these non-Jews, these Gentiles, the same miracles that he'd performed earlier on in the Gospel for the Jews, Jesus is saying to these crowds, I am your God too.

I am your Messiah, your King. And the salvation blessing that I'm bringing is every bit as much for all of you as it is for my people, the Jews.

The reaction of the crowds in verse 31 proves that they've got the point. Surely they're amazed at what they've seen, you would be wouldn't you? And so end of verse 31, they praised the God of Israel.

Actually that's such a Jewish way of referring to God. Over 200 times in the Old Testament, God is called the God of Israel, but only twice in the whole of the New Testament and only on this one occasion here in Matthew.

[10 : 47] But it proves that they've got the point. You've realized that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the Lord Almighty Himself, the God of Israel who proved again and again in the Old Testament that he was for his people, the Jews, is now for them as well.

He's not the God of one people with an exclusive interest in them. Rather, he's the God of all people. And he's come to bring his salvation to as many as will receive him, whatever tribe or tongue they're from.

I don't know if you've ever had that experience of trying to talk to a friend about Jesus or maybe, and they've replied by saying something like, I'm not interested in Jesus, I'm a Muslim.

Or maybe they've said, I'm really pleased you've got a faith, but it's not for me, I'm a scientist or I'm not religious. Because though Jesus is of no relevance for people who are scientists or grew up with a different belief system, or maybe you've heard someone try out that line that people often say about Christianity, that it's a Western religion.

Actually, it's a remarkably ignorant thing to say. It's ignorant historically because Jesus wasn't a Western or neither were any of his followers.

[12 : 11] And even today, if you look at a map of world religion, you'll find far more Christians in Africa and South America and China and Korea than you'll ever find in any of the Western countries of Europe and North America.

But the real ignorance of that statement is theological because Jesus didn't come for one little group or one type of person from one particular background. He came to bring salvation blessing to the whole world, to as many as would receive him.

But even though the statement's ignorant, it's still, I find, a pretty effective smear. It still lets someone hold Jesus at arm's length without ever really having to face up to his claims.

It says, I don't need to think about Jesus because he's not for people like me. And this passage is here to call the bluff of that myth.

The last church I worked for was in the centre of London. And you'll know that London is one of the most cosmopolitan and diverse cities on earth. The last census in 2011 said that only 45% of Londoners now are what they class as white British.

[13 : 25] That was down from 58%, just 10 years earlier. A remarkable change in that city. And that diversity was reflected in our congregation. Someone once worked out that there were over, people from over 70 different nationalities that would gather in our church, Sunday by Sunday.

Our church in St Andrews is tiny in comparison. But when I counted it up the other day, I still reckon there are 15 to 20 different nations that are represented as we gather together week by week.

Back in London, I once had the privilege of baptising some Chinese twins. They'd both grown up studying the sciences at Imperial and they'd grown up as absolutely convinced atheists.

And baptising them was tricky actually because they looked identical. And it's always a bit awkward if you get someone's name wrong at the moment that you're trying to baptise them. So we had all sorts of codes going on just to make sure that I did the right one at the right time.

But they'd grown up thinking that Christianity was a religion for stupid westerners. And then they came to church and as they heard about Jesus as they engaged with his claims, especially as they

actually in their case investigated the evidence for the resurrection as a historical and objective fact. [14:41] And if you've never done that, you really ought to look into it. It's incredibly compelling. Well they came to see as they did that that Jesus isn't just a western myth for children on a par with Father Christmas.

They came to realise that he was the God of the whole earth. And so at their baptism I had to ask them, do you turn to Christ? Out of all of the belief systems in all of the world, do you turn to Jesus of Nazareth?

I said, yeah we do. Because they'd come to realise the global reach of his blessing. They'd realised that he came for people like them as well and that realisation changed their life and it continues to change the life of people all over the world today.

The rest of the passage teaches the same lesson in a different kind of way. Let's move on to the second point. We had the miracles on the mount. Now we meet the compassion of the Christ. Let's pick it up at verse 32. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I've compassion for this people. They've already been with me three days and they have nothing to eat.

[15:53] I don't want to send them away hungry or they make a lapse on the way. His disciples answered, well where can we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd? How many loaves do you have? Jesus asked.

Seven they replied and a few small fish. And first of all you've got to love the compassion of Jesus. He's just spent three solid days with these people healing the crowds, presumably teaching them. He's turned their lives upside down, he's fulfilled their dreams and now I'm not content with that. He's worried that they might be hungry. It's a sort of practical love and compassion that we most often see from a mother rather than a global superstar.

My mom still does it to me. If ever I stay the night and she lives in Carlisle so I sometimes stay with her if I'm on my way south or coming back up to St. Andrew's. And without fail as I'm trying to walk out the door she appears from the kitchen with a little packed lunch in a plastic bag.

And by that stage what I'm going to eat hasn't even occurred to me and no matter how many times I try and tell her that I'm quite a big boy now and that I'm probably capable of making my own sandwich if I need it, still she insists.

[17:02] Moms are just like that. But I don't suppose that any musician has ever given out packed lunches to their fans on the way out of a concert just in case they felt a little bit peckish on the way home.

It's not the behavior of a global superstar. But Jesus is full of the deepest compassion for people. He's taught them, he's healed them and now he wants to feed them.

And straight away somebody might be wondering if Matthew's got his sums wrong. We most often talk, don't we, about the feeding of the 5,000 and yet here we're talking about the feeding of the 4,000. Actually they're two separate events.

So Matthew recorded, if you flip back the page, the feeding of the 5,000 in chapter 14 starting at verse 13. And now he's still decided to tell us about the feeding of the 4,000.

So the question is why would Matthew, I mean parchment was pretty sparse in those days. So why would he bother to include in his gospel two such similar stories right bang next door to each other?

[18:07] And the reader has meant to ask ourselves to compare and contrast the two. So let's do that for a second. The key similarities are what Jesus does and what the miracle signifies.

Pretty big deal stuff. In both cases he takes a very small amount of food and he multiplies it miraculously to feed many thousands. And the first, it was five loaves and two fish and Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000 men and all of their families as well.

This time it's seven loaves and a few small fish and Jesus feeds a crowd of 4,000 plus their families. So the most basic level, these signs are evidence that Jesus is God the Creator on earth, doing Genesis one type stuff, making stuff out of nothing in order to provide for people.

But there's more going on here than that because no Jew could ever have read these stories without looking back to God's miraculous provision of manna in the wilderness after he'd rescued them from Egypt.

And no Jew could have read them without looking forward to the great messianic banquet that had been prophesied by Isaiah, a sign of God's salvation, which means that if we were to think of these signs as being just feeding miracles, would be only halfway there.

[19 : 29] Actually, these are salvation miracles. They're proof that Jesus is God on earth. They're proof that he's come to lead his people and a new exodus out of slavery to sin and all the way to his long promised heavenly banquet.

And all of that is true of both of these miracles. But it's the difference that points to the key lesson for us. Because again, this time the people for whom Jesus provides all this bread miraculously are not Jews, but Gentiles.

And significantly, he doesn't just provide them with a few crumbs under the table. But it's his verse 37, enough that all of them were able to eat and be satisfied, just as the Jews have been in chapter 14.

So there's our key lesson again for tonight in lots of ways. It's been our theme of the whole day together. Jesus has come to bring his salvation blessing to all people.

There's no prejudice in him, no discrimination. Just what would you call it? An international heart of compassion.

[20 : 44] It's a lesson that symbolizes neatly in all of these leftovers. In the feeding of the 5000, there were 12 baskets of leftovers, but this time there were seven. It's not because kind of the battery of Jesus' power is run down a little bit, so he can quite produce enough this time.

The numbers are highly significant. There were 12 tribes of Israel. And so the 12 baskets of leftovers in the Jewish feeding symbolize that the grace of Jesus is sufficient for all the people of Israel, as many as would come and receive his salvation.

And seven was the number for perfection or completion. And so the seven baskets are there to say that the saving grace of Jesus is not just for Israel, but actually for the whole world that God had made in seven days.

So I hope we can see that even the details work together to underline the central message of our passage today. The salvation of Jesus is for all the world.

There's a verse in Isaiah 49 that expresses the point. Well, God says to his servant whom we know to be Jesus, it is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I've kept.

[22 : 07] I will make you also a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

Because God's plan was never local and parochial, but always global. Being a savior of one nation was too small a thing for Jesus.

I love that phrase. Says that he is worthy of global praise and worship.

Three concluding implications briefly if I may. The first is embedded in the text itself. When the Gentiles of verse 31 saw what Jesus was doing when they realized that he's the king and the savior of people from every land, when they realized that the blessing of his salvation wasn't just for one little group, but could extend even to them.

They were amazed and they praised the God of Israel. And that's a good place for us to be again this evening as we go into a new week.

[23 : 14] I guess it's where we were as we came to the Lord's Supper this morning. Full of praise for who Jesus is. Full of praise that his love is so broad and so deep that it can extend to people like us.

An 18th century writer tells the story of a young student traveling in America when he met an Indian Christian, an old guy who seemed to be very full of Jesus.

And one evening they were sitting around the campfire, the story goes, and the student asked him, so why is it that Jesus means so much to you? And rather than saying anything, apparently the old, like, picture worm off the floor and threw it down near to the flames of the campfire.

And the student watched in horror as this little worm started to writhe around in agony and begin to bake. But then when it was just about to die, there's a happy ending, don't worry, no animals were harmed in the making of this illustration.

When it was just about to die, the Indian lent forward, picked it up, and it said to have rested it close to his heart. And then as the worm recovered and revived, the Indian turned to that little student and said just four words, I was that worm.

[24 : 45] That is a quaint illustration, isn't it? It feels all very 18th century, but I love it. And I take it that every Christian here will be able to relate to it.

When we came to the table this morning, we came not trusting in our own righteousness and our own goodness, but only in his grace and mercy.

We came with hearts full of praise and thanksgiving. Because we know in our hearts deeply that while we are great sinners, the Lord Jesus is an even greater Savior.

So praise. The second implication is equality. The Gentiles in this passage started life far away from God and far away from his people.

They were dogs. But as they came to Jesus, he received them and he treated them in exactly the same way as anyone else. He included them as equals in his family.

[25 : 52] And he poured out his blessing and his compassion upon them. And I just want to touch on this for a second, but it would be odd, wouldn't it, if in a church we were ever to seek to resurrect divides and barriers that Christ destroyed at the cross.

If we were ever to think that our little group, however we define that, were the premier league of Christianity, but those over there, those people that don't share our background, well, they're all a bit second division, all a bit hip.

Is that harsh but fair? I hope that coming to the table this morning reminded us that we all stand equal before the cross.

Or better, that we all bow down with humble gratitude before the cross. Divisions were equal, just beggars who've been given some bread.

Final implications a little bit broader. It flows from this compassion of Jesus that we see here in Matthew 15, but we see that compassion even more clearly, don't we, on the cross, was in his death.

[27 : 08] Jesus was willing to give his life so that he could open up the way to heaven, so that he could fling open the gates, so that people from every nation might come in and share in his glory and his triumph.

You could say that Jesus' heart of compassion for the world won't be satisfied until he's gathered together for himself disciples from every people group under the sun.

The book of Revelation looks forward to a day when that mission is complete. When they gather around the throne and in front of Jesus the Lamb, a great multitude that no one can count, people from every nation and tribe and language.

They cry out, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. That's where history is heading. The compassion of the Christ demands it and guarantees it.

I'm increasingly persuaded, we've been preaching through Matthew and St. Andrew's since I got there about 18 months ago now. We're up to about chapter 18, I think, at the moment.

[28 : 26] I'm increasingly persuaded that the main burden of the whole of Matthew's gospel is that anyone who has a true sense of the identity of Jesus, the one who's in charge of the world, is introduced in chapter one, verse one, is the Son of Man, the Son of Abraham, the King of the whole world through whom God's blessing will come to the whole world.

Anyone who has that sense of the identity of Jesus and anyone who shares his heart of compassion will give themselves to the task that Matthew entrusts Jesus and trusts to his disciples in these last verses of the gospel.

When risen from the dead, Jesus appeared before his disciples and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. In other words, I'm the God of all of the nations.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded.

Surely I am with you always. I know that great task of making disciples of all nations stands right at the heart of what you guys are up to as a church.

[29 : 46] That means you're very, very close to the heart of Jesus himself. We pray for you guys that God will sustain you in that work. It's exhausting.

It's hard when people leave the church to go and plant a new church. We miss them terribly. We pray that God will sustain you and that you'll keep doing it more and more and more and that you'll set an example to all the rest of us churches in the denomination and further a field in that regard. Because of who Jesus is, because he's not just a little tribal deity. He's the God of the whole world and he came for people of every kind.

And this city is full of people. This land is full of people who know nothing of him. And they must hear of him. They must hear. Let me lead us in prayer.

Almighty God, we do want to thank and praise you for your Son, the Lord Jesus. We thank you again that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, that he came, purposing to bring his salvation and extend it to all of the nations of the world.

[31 : 04] Thank you that you are going about the work of building his church. And thank you that as we look around the world, even though in our land, in these days, things seem hard and the gains seem modest.

We praise you for the way that you're working in right across the globe to bring thousands and thousands and tens upon tens of thousands of people to know him.

And so we pray for this church, we pray for our own church in St Andrews and all the works in this denomination and right across this land that you would so fill our minds and our hearts with passion for who Jesus is and understanding of his global reach that we would long to and be willing to leave our comfort zones so that we might play our part in making disciples of every nation.

Not because we want a bigger name for ourselves or our churches or our denomination, but so that Jesus might be glorified as the God of the whole earth and the Savior of as many as we'll put their trust in him.

And so we pray for his name and his glory. Amen.