

Rector's Sermon: Trinity 1 (14 June)

On a wall near the main entrance to the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, is a portrait with the following inscription: 'James Butler Bonham - no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom.'

It may seem a strange story to start a sermon, but it illustrates a particular challenge for Christians. Our great commission from Christ is to become the Body of Christ on earth, but what does that body look like? Well in the same way that the portrait of Major James Bonham hangs in the main entrance to the Alamo so that people can better know what James Bulter Bonham looked like, so the Church is here through the power of the Holy Spirit so that people may better know the nature of the man who died on the cross for us. In and through the power of the Holy Spirit we are here to resemble the risen Christ and be his presence on earth.

Two of the main characteristics of Jesus' nature are his deep and profound compassion and his desire for Justice. When we look at Jesus it is his compassion and sense of justice that impelled him in all of his actions.

The literal meaning of the word compassion means "to suffer with," com-passion. When we feel compassion towards someone, we sense the pain and hardship they're experiencing. It's like we're putting ourselves in their shoes. Their trial becomes our trial. Their suffering becomes our suffering. And our response is rooted in justice as we seek their flourishing.

The verses we heard in today's Gospel from Matthew describe Jesus going about his ministries. He's travelling from town to town. Everywhere he goes, he teaches in the synagogues.

As Jesus gazed out at the people gathered about him, Matthew says he was filled with compassion. Their pain, their loneliness, their grief, it all became his. He saw just how harassed and helpless they were. His response to their plight was loving compassion.

Compassion and Justice form the backbone of Jesus' ministry and it therefore is utterly of God. It is the deepest compassion that compelled God to take on our human flesh in the first place. A desire for the flourishing of all, rooted in justice and mercy, are the hallmarks of his earthly mission. And compassion prompted him to pour himself out to death on a cross.

As disciples of Christ, the church is compelled to be of the same mind as Christ. From his mind to our hearts. And throughout every generation, compassion and justice has been the calling of Christ's church.

One of my favourite theologians, Jürgen Moltmann said, “The church exists for Christ’s sake.” The church exists for Christ’s sake. As the church, Christ’s compassion and justice becomes our chief endeavour. Just as he was moved by and acted from that compassion and justice, so we do, too.

In each generation, the church has strived to respond to times of need with a servant’s heart. We currently find ourselves right in the middle of such a time with the COVID-19 outbreak. Compassion calls to us. Justice demands that we respond. It calls us to respond with a servant’s heart. The immense suffering across our communities, in our local hospitals, care homes, hospices as well as in our homes has profoundly impacted on us and as the body of Christ we wish to reach out and serve with compassion and love.

We have seen and are seeing wonderful examples of compassion all around us:

- health care professionals and volunteers tirelessly treating patients at often great risk to themselves.
- Researchers working towards treatments and vaccines
- Leaders, national and local, working to do whatever is in their powers to keep the public safe
- Truck drivers who ship vital goods from place to place
- Factory workers working extra shifts in order to meet the demand for goods
- Neighbours keeping track of one another
- Volunteers reaching out to feed the hungry and help the vulnerable
- And everyone following practices to curtail the spread of the virus so that their neighbour may flourish.

We have seen that poverty and race impact on how serious the illness is and we are called to seek justice. If one is living in cramped housing with poor ventilation, or in a flat in a high-rise block with no balcony, living with family members across the generations, it becomes the perfect breeding ground for the virus. People on low incomes and people of ethnic minorities primarily live in such accommodation and so will have a higher risk of infection. Social injustice is a major contributor for people suffering from Covid 19.

It is compassion and justice that should root our response to the horrendous, barbaric and racist killing of George Floyd. ‘Black Lives Matter’. It is compassion that impels the Good Shepherd to leave the 99 sheep and seek, find and reconcile the lost sheep so that ‘All Lives Can Matter’. ‘All Lives Cannot Matter’ if ‘Black Lives Don’t Matter’. That is why this is such a critical moment in our history. We cannot be the Body of Christ if ‘Black Lives Don’t Matter’. We cannot be the Body of Christ if we value the elderly or people with underlying health issues less than others. We cannot be the Body of Christ if disabled people are second class citizens. We cannot be the Body of Christ if the poorest carry the greatest burden of austerity. We cannot be the Body of Christ if women are not paid the same wage as men. We cannot be the Body of Christ if the love shared between same sex couples is

diminished. We cannot be the Body of Christ if, when use of force or restraint is applied, black and minority individuals in the U.K. are twice as likely to die in police custody than white individuals. As it says in the 5th Chapter of Amos, verse 24 – ‘let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!’

Compassion and justice are the selfless actions of a servant ministry wholly focused on the flourishing of the other. A servant ministry sees the needs of the neighbour and seeks to understand the world through their eyes. In doing so, the welfare of our neighbour becomes our chief concern. Just like Jesus said, we lose ourselves. We lose ourselves, but we gain our neighbour. And oddly, this loss brings us back to ourselves because this is how grace works. In losing ourselves, we find our self. Not the same self we were before. No, this time we discover our true self, transformed by the mind of Christ through the grace of God.

The first-generation church found they had a need for people to see to the daily needs of their community. They needed people to oversee the hunger program to feed the widows among them. And so they appointed Deacons. The church has been served by deacons ever since then.

The traditional mark of a deacon is a towel. Think of a waiter. When they come to the table, they frequently have a towel. Maybe it’s over their arm, or maybe it’s tucked through the tie on their apron. That towel is the mark of their service.

And so I ask myself and I ask us all today: what is our towel? How has God called us to be his compassion and his justice? How are we resembling the risen Christ and being his presence here on earth in this time and in this place? Amen