

Good God, Good Church: Compassion & Empathy - 16th January 2022

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] there you up everyone it's ace to be with you today in this way as we settle in for another sunday session together here on youtube stick on your slippers pour yourself a coffee a coke or a cocktail and we'll let this next half hour or so take its course my name's matt the vicar of and we're planning on being back in person at st john's next sunday morning the 23rd after having a few weeks away as a bit of an omicron circuit breaker if you will we'll keep on putting our in-person teaching slots from our services up here on youtube so whether in person or online we'll hopefully stay on track with each other it's been quite the week though hasn't it on the national stage from yet more downing street parties and calls for the prime minister to resign have been china sponsored spies in parliament to prince andrew no longer being his royal highness it's a pretty bleak week to have faith in our establishment and those in power sue gray's name is now a household one as we're constantly being told to await her report make it out what you will although it does provide a good excuse for a lack of planning in our house what's for tea dad i'm afraid i'm afraid you'll have to wait for sue gray's report to find out son no doubt there'll be more revelations and fallout to come but in tandem with the wholly understandable anger and incredulity that people across the board are feeling we're grateful god that the better news the inspiring news the good news is that we're here to love to follow and to put our faith in you the god who is the very definition of goodness indeed if you want to see what integrity truth righteousness faithfulness looks like in person we need look no further than jesus the visible image of the invisible god the one who has come to preach good news to the poor freedom for the prisoners sight to the blind and release for the oppressed so we want to thank you god that jesus is the antidote to despair the guard against cynicism the one who protects us from giving in by giving us the hope the joy the peace of his love rulers and empires may rise and fall and mark on this god does some need a fall and quickly but your kingdom god your rule your reign is thankfully as eternal as it is exemplary and so may that truth give us cause for optimism today we pray thank you god amen that's the bigger picture but closer to home i don't know how your week has been a little winter sunshine would have been a welcome sight i'm sure for us in our family well having said last week that we've so far dodged the covid curse our son bobby tested positive this week so the rest of us have been lying lower and lateral flowing in expectation of that t-bar turning red we'll see if so but the beauty of youtube is that it's covid contagion free so we're good to go this week as we continue a series we started last sunday called good god good church now if you haven't caught up with that from last week online maybe pause this one and

flick back a week because as we said last time the idea of goodness of what makes something or someone good well it's a concept which is championed throughout the whole of the bible in fact there are over 700 mentions of goodness in all making it one of the key ways we're called to understand the character of god and therefore how we as a church are called to live in line with that goodness as we also said last week though goodness in our day and age can be a pretty subjective quality what's good for you may not be good for me and so on which means that our challenge in exploring what it means to be a good church under a good god arguably needs us to focus on what some of the objective qualities of goodness are as with all objective truth though the good news is that we need look no further than the truth himself jesus to see the timeless eternal qualities of goodness being put into practice and so over these next few weeks we'll be unpacking qualities such as grace and graciousness importance of of prioritizing people truth telling justice service and then rounding everything up by looking at christlikeness as a whole to get us going today though it'd be good to explore the qualities and importance of two different but closely connected words

compassion and empathy compassion now if we want a dictionary definition of the first of these two words we could say that compassion is a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering so there's sympathy and sorrow for someone's situation compassion and a keenness to help do something about it compassion being compassionate is therefore a feeling of sympathy which prompts us to want to take action no wonder in the letter to the ephesians we're told therefore be kind and compassionate to one another compassion and compassion like goodness is a quality long associated with god so famously in psalm 145 for example we read this the lord is gracious and compassionate slow to anger and rich in love the lord is good to all he has compassion on all that he has made now what's interesting is if we look at the hebrew word in the old testament you know the hebrew scriptures which here is translated into english as compassion it's the word rachamim a nice little phlegmy hucking sound there and aren't you glad we're not talking in person with covid in attendance but this word rachamim comes from another hebrew word rachem which means womb and so the hebrew word for compassion has an association with being womb-like implying that compassion is rooted in a place of nurture where life is cared for and new opportunities come into being i don't know about you but i find that to be a very moving idea in that god's care and compassion for us is like that of an expectant mother and the intimate bond which comes with that and yet what's also interesting is if we look at how this word compassion is used in the new testament indeed just as god is described as having compassion in places like the psalms in the new testament so jesus is described in similar terms in the gospels so for example in mark's gospel just before jesus ends up feeding the five thousand we're told this as jesus went ashore he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them many things or in luke's gospel when jesus sees in the town of nain a widow as she grieves the death of her son we're told that when the lord saw her he had compassion for her other translations say his heart went out to her again it's this idea of nurture of tender kindness and care and yet since the new testament wasn't written in hebrew but in greek the word we translate on these occasions as compassion is not rachamim but a greek word splanknizami splanknizami try saying that after a few peronies but just as rachamim has this association with the womb so splanknizami literally means to be moved in your guts it may well be where we get our english word spleen from it's that stomach churning instinctive gut feeling of being compelled to do something kind for someone else knowing deep down that you need to try and help them compassion if you like which wells up from deep within compassion therefore is as our english word suggests come from the latin for with combined with patty the latin word for to suffer compassion therefore means a willingness to suffer with a combination of both an instinctive gut reaction maybe but also a desire to offer womb-like care and nurture of others qualities which we so often see displayed in the life of jesus that's compassion but then what of empathy well they're very closely linked but if compassion means empathy means to suffer with empathy means to suffer in empathy is this sense therefore of feeling someone else's pain putting yourself in their position in order to vicariously experience that pain with them as such empathy is a very involved very raw very experiential kind of emotion whereas sympathy is more along the lines of i see your pain empathy says i feel your pain in fact in order to get our heads around empathy and the differences between sympathy and empathy here's a little animation which puts images to some words on this by renowned author speaker and all-round empathy expert renee brown so what is empathy and why is it very different than sympathy empathy fuels connection empathy fuels connection sympathy drives disconnection empathy it's very interesting teresa wiseman is a nursing scholar who studied professions very diverse professions where empathy is relevant and came up with four qualities of empathy empathy perspective perspective taking the ability to take the perspective of another person or recognize their perspective as their truth staying out of judgment not easy when you enjoy it as much as most of us do recognizing emotion in other people and then communicating that empathy is feeling with people empathy and to me i always think of empathy as this kind of sacred space when someone's kind of in a deep hole and they shout out from the bottom and they say i'm stuck it's dark i'm overwhelmed and then we look and we say hey i'm down i know what it's like down here and you're not alone sympathy is empathy is empathy is a choice and it's a vulnerable choice because in order to connect with you i have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling rarely if ever does an empathic response begin with at least i had a yeah and we do it all the time because you know what someone just shared something with us that's incredibly painful and we're trying to silver lining it i don't think that's a verb but i'm using it as one

we're trying to put the silver lining around it so i had a miscarriage at least you know you can get pregnant i think my marriage is falling apart at least you have a marriage john's getting kicked out of school at least sarah is an a student but one of the things we do sometimes in the face of very difficult conversations is we try to make things better if i share something with you that's very difficult i'd rather you say i don't even know what to say right now i'm just so glad you told me our family because the truth is rarely can a response in a way that's what makes something better what makes something better is connection it's interesting at the beginning of that clip brenney brown referenced a definition from nursing scholar theresa wiseman of four qualities of empathy if you recall she said empathy is all about perspective taking, staying out of judgment, recognizing emotion in others and then communicating that recognition. Four qualities of being able to empathize, of being able to feel with people, which i'd say again are abundantly present when we look at the life of Jesus.

For example, let's just go back to that story we mentioned earlier from Luke's Gospel, when Jesus comes across a widow grieving her son. Indeed, here's the full passage from Luke chapter 7.

[15:25] Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, Don't cry.

Then he went up and touched the bear they were carrying him on, and the bearer stood still. He said, Young man, I say to you, get up.

The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. A great prophet has appeared among us, they said.

God has come to help his people. This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. You see, as we look at this story, I think we can clearly see Jesus' ability to empathize coming to the fore. So, taking each of these four qualities in turn, if firstly empathy is about perspective-taking. We're told this. As Jesus approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.

It's interesting that there's a recognition here of the mother's status. She's a widow, and this young man was her only son was her only son. You see, in Jesus' day, widows often had no income, no property of their own. Her children, if she had any, would therefore be her only means of support.

[17:27] And yet, since her only son has now died, not only will this widow be heartbroken, she's likely to end up destitute as well. How do we know she was a widow? How do we know this was her only son?

Well, it stands to reason that either Jesus is given some divine knowledge, or more simply, perhaps, as he's approached her, he's enquired and found out about her status.

Jesus is keen, it seems, to understand her story, to take her perspective. Jesus is empathising, entering into her situation.

What's more, another quality of empathy, that of recognising emotion in others, quickly follows.

Since we're told that when the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, don't cry.

When Jesus saw her. What a privilege that must have been to have been seen, you know, really seen, by Jesus.

[18:43] Jesus recognises the emotion in her, the tears, the anguish, a recognition that Jesus then communicates with his words, don't cry.

And he says this, not in a put-yourself-together kind of way, or in that at-least sense, as Brené Brown was saying, you know, don't cry, at least you're surrounded by friends here, or whatever.

No, the don't cry recognition of her tears from Jesus is prompted by this deep, gut-wrenching compassion we talked about earlier.

His heart went out to this widow. His heart broke, if you like, in empathy with hers. But don't cry also suggests that action is about to be taken that will alleviate her tears.

Action, which, if you remember from that earlier definition of compassion, is a key part of it.

Compassion is sympathy and sorrow accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

[19:54] But again, how remarkable must it have been for this widow to know and receive such recognition, such solidarity, such compassion from Jesus?

Widows so often would be overlooked and forgotten by society, but here, Jesus zones in and feels deeply for, feels deeply with this woman.

And then a fourth quality of empathy. Staying out of judgment. Where does that come into things? Well, we're told, then, Jesus went up and touched the beer, the stretcher they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still.

Why might this action display a lack of judgment on Jesus' part? Well, again, in Jesus' culture, to touch the body, to touch even the stretcher of a dead body, would make anyone who did ritually unclean.

But Jesus isn't bothered by or seemingly even in agreement with such a rule. No, there's no judgment from Jesus that death is a dirty business to be avoided.

[21 : 10] No, rather, it's a chance for his love, his compassion, his empathy, his lack of judgment to be displayed. No wonder the bearers stood still, no doubt shocked that a rabbi of Jesus standing would be prepared to get stuck in in this way.

And then, as if to summarise all that has gone before, Jesus says, Young man, I say to you, get up. The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

So Jesus speaks directly to him, young man, a way of acknowledging perhaps his age and the added grief this would have given his mother, before, poignantly we're told, Jesus gave him back to his mother.

A gift of restored, resurrected life. A sign, perhaps, of the way Jesus himself would soon descend to the pit of the dead, before showing a way out from death and into light and life above.

No wonder we're told the crowds were all filled with awe and praised God. Awe for the miracle, yeah, no doubt.

[22 : 31] But I wonder if they were also subconsciously praising God for having seen such empathy and compassion being modelled in the life and love of Jesus.

Empathy, feeling with people. Brené Brown called that a sacred space. The word sacred means connected with God.

And as was also said in that animated clip, what makes something better is connection. Connection with God, yeah, but also through empathy, connection with each other.

And that, I would say, is how empathy can help us to be a good church. Because it fosters a deeper connection between us as people.

A deeper connection which is in itself sacred, connected with each other, and connected ultimately to God. And so what does it mean to be a church, a people, a community, who are characterised by empathy?

[23 : 45] Well, as a minimum, I'd say it does mean following Jesus' example and being able to inhabit those four qualities. Perspective taking, staying out of judgement, recognising emotion in others, and then communicating that recognition to them.

But to ground that a bit more, here's a good quote from a pastor called Brett Younger, who leads a church in Brooklyn, in New York. He says this, Empathy is usually quiet.

Empathy steps to the other side of the sidewalk to make others comfortable. Empathy does not let out that sigh, you know the one, the wordless disapproval toward the person in the checkout line whose toddler is having a meltdown.

When empathy has to correct someone, it pains her to do it, and so she does so gently. Empathy makes a habit of giving others the benefit of the doubt.

Empathy gives charitably, knowing that eventually someone will take advantage of our generosity. Empathy tries to listen rather than convince.

[25 : 07] Empathy understands that there are reasons people are the way that they are. All of which sounds pretty spot on to me.

And if we want a briefer summary to stick on our fridge or have us a screensaver or just keep in mind, we won't go wrong with this from Paul in the book of Romans who I'd say summarizes empathy like this.

Rejoice with those who rejoice. Rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Now, it's not necessarily easy to rejoice, to be happy with the joys of others, especially if we ourselves are feeling a bit miffed or shortchanged in life.

But I think we'll know how supported, how seen, how good we feel when someone else is genuinely chuffed for us and celebrates with us.

So perhaps we could pray this week for God to grow afresh in us that spiritual fruit of joy. Joy not simply for ourselves, not simply in God, but to empathetically take joy in the lives of others.

[26 : 22] That's a prayer I'd suggest God will be quick to answer. Equally, mourning with those who mourn. It's not easy to resist that at least kind of chin-up, silver-lining attitude that we saw earlier.

And neither does it mean it won't cost us. Mourning with others will cost us emotionally. It'll take our time, our energy. It'll leave us feeling incredibly awkward at times at the helplessness we feel in not being able to fix things.

But asking God to help us to do as Jesus does and to enter into the pain of others in their grief, you know, their sadness, well, that empathetic solidarity can work wonders in helping to alleviate the isolation and loneliness that can often weigh down those who are living with loss.

And so again, praying this week for God to give us the gift of being able to grieve with those who grieve. That's a prayer I don't think God would turn down.

All of you be of one mind, says Peter in 1 Peter 3 verse 8. And that unity as a people, as a church, well, that can only be nurtured by God as we live in empathy with one another.

[27 : 53] That's a gift of a good God who longs to see us be a good church, following in the footsteps of Jesus and empowered in our empathy by the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, with all that we've been looking at in mind, let's turn to a song of praise to God, the one who through good times and bad has always been our faithful friend.

Here's a new recording that St John's Band have put together for us this week. A smasher of a song called Great Is Your Faithfulness. Great Is Your Faithfulness Great Is Your Faithfulness Great is your faithfulness Oh God, my Father Oh God, my friend Your love, it never fades And so I'll love you until the end When shadows fall When shadows fall You never change

From age to age You never change Great Is Your Faithfulness Your faithfulness Through the years You've always been left Great Is Your love for us Your love for us Through the years You've always been left Great Is Your love for us Great Is Your kindness God You are our shelter Our dwelling place Your presence like a fire Hope for us Hope for tomorrow Hope for tomorrow

Strength for today Strength for today When shadows fall You never change Hope for tomorrow Strength for today When shadows fall You never change piano judiciary Great Is Your faithfulnessabilities You'll never change Great Is Your faithfulness Through the years you've always been there We will stand, we will stand upon your promises We are strong, we are strong because our hope is in you We will run, we will run, we will run

[31 : 27] We belong, we belong, we belong to you We belong to you Great is your faithfulness, your faithfulness Through the years you've always been there Great is your love for us, love for us Through the years you've always been there Great is your faithfulness, your faithfulness Through the years you've always been there Great is your love for us, your love for us Through the years you've always been there

Through the years you've always been there Love that song Love that song Alright, we'll turn in there for today Next Sunday, it'll be great to see you either in person at St John's Or on here once we upload the talk from our 10am Sunday service onto the channel here Don't forget we've added that new song to our worship songs playlist here on YouTube as well So there's plenty to dip into during the week on there as well We'll be back next week with another theme from this Good God Good Church series

Until then Take care and let's go with a prayer of blessing over us And so I pray that the blessing of God God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit May that blessing rest and reign over us Enabling us to be people who live with empathy and compassion at our core Blessing in turn All those who God has given us to love and live alongside Both now and always Amen