

Compassion-fatigue and moral dilemma

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 14 June, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Pentecost 3A

Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

In the past few months of living with COVID-19, most of us have been confronted with what is termed by some as ‘compassion-fatigue’. Whether in our letter boxes or email inboxes, there have been pleas for donations for a myriad of causes.

This compassion-fatigue has hit a peak in the last couple of weeks, with the heavy issue of BLM, Black Lives Matter. We know it well. And the rightful demonstrations and rage has met the full face of the COVID-19 regulations. There is understandable conflict. The moral dilemma that we have of whether to stick with the health restrictions of the last three months, or to respond to the urgent call to justice of what is now a world-wide issue.

For many, supporting the movement of BLM – Black Lives Matter - is a no brainer, but there remains the constant tug of doing our part in ensuring the health of the nation.

However, it would appear that some in positions of authority, hide behind the veil of COVID-19 to promote their cautious, if not, conservative attitude of opposing the pressing issue of Black Lives Matter. For them, it seems no more than an excuse. Could it be said that COVID-19 has become a convenient excuse for a “do nothing” attitude to matters of palpable importance that has existed for decades?

For the last three decades since the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in custody, over 430 lives – Aboriginal lives, the lives of the First Peoples of Australia - have been lost because of law-enforcement negligence. It is little wonder that the rage of the First People has been ignited with the singular death of an African-American that has taken on global viral proportions.

The name George Floyd is rightfully known all over the world,

But, do we in Australia know any names of First People who have died in Australian custody - even this year? Do we know any names?

So what has the current issue got to do with the gospel passage that we have today?

The gospel reading of the sending the disciples was as much a call to compassion and healing as it was to mission. It says, “*Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*”. Jesus was sending his disciples out as a matter of urgency. The time was now, and there was no time to wait, and there was no room for the attitude of “oh well, one of these days”.

This was no time for meetings or internal or external enquiries or Royal Commissions, it was the time for immediacy. Indeed, it is the same for today as it was when Jesus sent out his disciples, because as confessing disciples of the 21st century, Jesus is sending us out as well.

A sent people, an apostolic people, a people who must be willing to deal with the struggle of the journey we call faith. Our walk of discipleship - with its twists, turns, and trials, forms us into a holy people. Being the baptised people means being the sent people of God.

We indeed feel weak, weary, and worn from the difficulties of living the way of Jesus. In our trials, and indeed, as we face compassion-fatigue and moral dilemma, we are participating in the way of Jesus as we grow in grace and truth.

The journey will be precarious and the apostles’ ministry and message will sometimes be unwelcome and unwanted; but those sent are reassured that God’s presence will sustain them – and us. It says, “*Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons*”, words of mission that would make the most experienced baulk and shudder.

Being a disciple does not insulate people and communities of faith from hard times, and the gospel writer reassures the reader that even in those times, God is with us and will provide for us.

To go out and “*Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons*”, is a call that is foreign to just sitting in our sanctuaries, hearing a good liturgy and sermon, singing inspiring songs, or even, heaven forbid, going out and doing a letter-box drop to invite our neighbours to come to our worship and attend our bible studies. Have we reduced mission to just that?

It is the call to go beyond where and who we are, into the frontline and coalface of essential service that so many of you are familiar with.

The risk of looking COVID-19 in the eye is familiar to many. the danger of exposure is the lifestyle of many, and yet the value of those essential services have been reduced in appreciation by the conservative and cautious commentator and politician, and the nay-sayers of social justice, who self-righteously hide behind the veil of COVID-19, and claiming to be the morally upright.

So yes, there remains compassion-fatigue and moral dilemma while facing several truths that appear to contradict. And that is the part of the journey of faith where certainly is elusive. It is the paradoxical conundrum that we all face, and we have to decide what is our response. Essentially, we are left to being compassionate to everyone, to going out to the risky places, to travelling to the places of Jesus' calling.

“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons”, he said very clearly.

In your compassion-fatigue and moral dilemma, what do you hear as God speaks? Are you going to be the conduit to enable people to breathe again?

God be with you, as you go.