

Sermon for St. James Anglican Sunday 9 September 2018

The Christian Response to Poverty – what does God require of us?

Readings from the Lectionary: James 2: 1 – 10, 14 - 17

Mark 7: 24 - 37

Collect: Life-giving God, you speak into the hurting and wounded places; empower us to speak your vision of wholeness, and turn us to action in the face of injustice, that empowered by the Spirit we may be agents of your healing love, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen.

Newsletter: As the new Wellington City Missioner, I have been reflecting on what God requires of each of us in relation to the way we care for those around us – especially for those who are struggling in life. What would it take to achieve the City Mission’s commitment to Empowerment, Transformation, Fullness of Life for all people? Are we a sufficiently compassionate people? Is it enough to feed, clothe, wash, care for and love those in need; or do we need to act to change the causes of their disadvantage? To date I have more questions than answers but I do know that the change we seek requires people of faith to act!

Good morning and thank you for your welcome. It is a privilege to be here today with my wife Alyson.

I bring you greetings this morning from both the Wellington City Mission and from Beachside Church in Plimmerton, where Alyson and I worship.

I am the new Wellington City Missioner (although, I don’t know how long new lasts for!) and I have the significant privilege and responsibility for leading and ministering to the Wellington City Mission. You may already be aware; the City Mission has 114 years of history, having been established by St. Peters in Willis Street in 1904 I am the first lay City Missioner in that whole history and denominationally I identify most as a Baptist, so I guess I’m breaking new ground in lots of different ways!

I see the Wellington City Mission as a part of the “hands and feet” of the church – ministering to those who most need our help

Our Vision: People and communities empowered, transformed, experiencing fullness of life.

Our Mission comes from a place of faith: *Centred on Christ’s compassion*, we seek to achieve fullness of life for those who are at risk or struggling in the Greater Wellington region.

The people of the Wellington region are wonderfully supportive of the work of The City Mission – giving of their time and their resources.

The Wellington City Mission although an incredibly strong brand, is in some ways, a misnomer because it implies that we have a mandate focused on Wellington City. This is not accurate – over 50% of our work happens in the communities of the Hutt Valley!

If we reflect back on the history of The Mission, the first foray into the valley was the founding of the Stop Out boys club in 1919 –which of course is now the Stop Out Football Club which celebrates their centenary next year (Celebration in this church on 2 June 2019). The real work in Lower Hutt however started with the establishment of an office, shop and welfare centre in Dudley Street in 1966. This facility operated for 12 years until the local committee sought to establish a new welfare centre, which was the Lower Hutt Family Centre. This was opened on 25 February 1979 by the Mayor of Lower Hutt (Sir John Kennedy-Good) and the Prime Minister (Rob Muldoon). Sometime after its establishment, the Family Centre became independent of the City Mission.

As I look back over the history of the City Mission, I see the Mission and the Missioner serving the people of this area in ways that were relevant and contextually appropriate for the time. It continues to be vital that we actively seek to be as relevant and effective as we can.

Today the Wellington City Mission serves approximately 400 of the Wellington Region's most vulnerable citizens every day. We do this through a range of activities:

We run an alternative education school for young people who have been excluded from mainstream education. This involves working with a number of challenges including difficult and dysfunctional families, addiction and mental health issues, and significant behavioural challenges.

We have a team of social workers who work with families that are struggling with relationships, poverty, parenting, addictions, violence and abuse.

At the other end of the age continuum we have a home visitation and support service for the elderly and we operate an 81 bed rest home and hospital facility in Titahi Bay.

And finally, we run a Mission for Independence which works with highly vulnerable people many of whom have significant health, mental health and addiction issues, a number are homeless or live in unacceptable accommodation.

We feed people, assist them to budget, or manage their money for them, help clothe and wash them, connect them to others in community and advocate for them to Government agencies and to local Councils.

The best part of my role and the greatest privilege is to have the opportunity to connect and engage with these people – they have taught me an extraordinary amount!

The receptionist at the Mission had a sign on her whiteboard that says:

“I am not interested in whether you’ve stood with the great. I am interested in whether you’ve sat with the broken”. I have the privilege to “sit with the broken”, and I suspect I have learnt more from and been inspired more by them, than they have by me.

Here are some of the things I have sought some understanding of in my brief time as the Wellington City Missioner:

The people we work with are not a lot different than you and I. We might see people in the street and very quickly judge their circumstances or their responsibility for their situation. But I have found that every one of these people has a “back story” (a “normal” life) – if we care enough to ask. And typically something has happened in their life – a health condition or illness, an addiction, an abusive relationship, a difficult or dysfunctional family life, a poor decision(s) by them or someone else... and the list goes on – and one or some of these things have impacted their life course forever!

The late Norman Kirk, the 29th Prime Minister of New Zealand from 1972 to 1974 said:

“People don’t want much – just somewhere to live, something to do, someone to love and something to hope for”. I think this applies to all of us!

They are not necessarily bad or failed people but they are people who are facing extraordinary challenges, and those of us who have the opportunity must provide whatever assistance we can.

The reading from James 2:14 –17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?
Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.
If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?
In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

We don’t achieve our salvation by our deeds, but our faith requires of us, to do what we can for others in need.

Two pieces of thinking, reflection and writing have influenced me greatly in my early days as City Missioner. The first is a book written by Gregory Boyle, A Jesuit priest working with the gangs in Los Angeles. The book is called *Tattoos on the Heart, the Power of Boundless Compassion*.

The book is a series of stories about Boyle's work amongst young rival gang members but it has conclusions about motivation and compassion that strike at the heart of what we do.

Two such quotes are as follows:

"To be in the world who God is, here is what we seek: A compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgement at how they carry it".

When I first read that, it deeply impacted me as I considered the implications of acknowledging what those in need have to bear rather than judging them or blaming them for it.

The second quote is:

"Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It is a covenant between equals". We are all created equal, but we don't all end up equal!

This compassion asks a lot of us, but this is the compassion that God has – and that God has for us! This too is the compassion we must have for others.

Throughout the New Testament we read stories of Jesus having compassion for those in need – from his mother Mary at the foot of the cross, to people in mourning, those with afflictions, and of course for children

So what do we do with that compassion? If we truly are the hands and feet of the church, are we demonstrating compassion as Christ would?

My second place of reflection asks this; is feeding and clothing and washing people, is caring for them and loving them - enough?

Jesus didn't tend people's wounds or make people comfortable – In loving them he healed them! In the passage we read today from Mark 7, he did exactly that for the young girl and the man who was deaf and mute. So what is it that God requires of us?

The second influence on me has been the work of Federic Ozanam (1813 – 1853) who, when he was 20 years old, founded the St. Vincent de Paul society. He said this in 1834:

"The question which is agitating the world today is a social one. It is a struggle between those who have nothing and those who have too much. It is a violent clash of opulence and poverty which is shaking the ground under our feet. Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between these two camps in order to accomplish by love what justice alone cannot do".

I have become particularly conscious as I have reflected on the work of the mission that we advocate for people very effectively on an individual basis, but I don't yet think we translate that into sufficient systemic advocacy or intercession.

It just doesn't feel good enough to tend to people's needs and do little about seeking to change the societal settings that led to them being in the situation they are in.

Watch this space as the Wellington City Mission considers its opportunities and responsibilities to influence some of these system settings!

Frederic Ozanam in 1848 at the age of 35 said:

“Yours must be a work of love, of kindness. You must give your time, your talents, yourselves. The poor person is a unique person of God’s fashioning with an inalienable right to respect. You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis. You must study the condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long-term improvement”.

This is not easy work. *Jackson Browne* has a song about Christmas called *The Rebel Jesus*. The words of the third verse go like this:

**Well we guard our world with locks and guns
And we guard our fine possessions
And once a year when Christmas comes
We give to our relations
And perhaps we give a little to the poor
If the generosity should seize us
But if any one of us should interfere
In the business of why there are poor
They get the same as the rebel Jesus**

It is so hard but it is also worthwhile and I believe God requires this of us.

I hope you can see why this is a real privilege to do this as my day job!

We can't all do what I do, but we can all have the compassion that stands in awe at what the poor have to carry, rather than standing in judgement at how they carry it.

And we can give of our time and resources to help those who need a wee bit of support.

What I ask of you this morning is that you think about how you can make a difference for others in the circles and worlds that you operate in and to the full extent of your abilities, and that you pose yourselves these questions:

What does God require of us in caring for those in our community that are struggling or need support?

How compassionate are we – as individuals and as a collective of God's people?

How do we most effectively demonstrate God's love to those around us?

I would love to have some easy answers for you but alas I do not. But as we seek to answer these questions for ourselves, I believe God will reveal himself and his plan for each of us in new and special ways!

My great, great, great grandfather William Carey said:

“I am not afraid of failure; I am afraid of succeeding at things that don’t matter”.

What are the things that we are succeeding at in our lives and do they really matter?

Prayer

AMEN