

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 Revd Claire Nye Hunter

7.30/9.30am Cathedral of St Michael and St George
 25 August 2013

Text: Luke 13: 10-17 “Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.”

Introduction

Today’s gospel reading is in my opinion one of the most deeply moving healing stories, unique to Luke. Jesus reaches out to an unnamed crippled woman and heals her.

In doing so, he shows the depth of his compassion

He breaks the cultural and religious norms of the day:

- by touching her (it was forbidden for a man, let alone a Rabbi, to touch a woman)
- by healing on the Sabbath (going against the religious rule of no work on that day)

This passage lends itself to explore many themes, for example

- Jesus’ radical attitude towards and treatment of women (appropriate at the end of August, the month of Women)
- Jesus’ healing ministry
- or invite you to reflect on your own life- what causes you to be ‘bent over’, weighed down, what keeps you bound or oppressed etc

However, when I consider this passage as **a whole unit**, I see the ministry of Jesus summed up in the well known phrase:

“Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable”.

These words have been attributed to many different people over the years, but I am told that it actually originates with Finley Peter Dunne, writing as far back as the 1890s.

So today I want to suggest that this ‘slogan’ is an excellent description of the ministry that Jesus offered in the synagogue on that Sabbath day (Luke 13:10-17). It is a ministry that we, as his disciples, are called to follow. ‘Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable’.

Comfort the afflicted

The crippled woman who had been bent over for 18 years and couldn’t stand straight up was certainly ‘afflicted’. (When I picture her in my mind, I see my own mother who, in her last months, was so bent over with osteoporosis that all she could see was the feet of those around her). Jesus, when seeing her, called to her and said: “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity’. The he laid his hands on her, resulting in her standing up straight and praising God.

Jesus set her free from her affliction by offering her the comfort of his healing touch. He healed her

physically – she could stand up straight

socially- she could look at people in the eye and talk to them face to face

emotionally- her self respect, dignity was restored

spiritually- at last she knew that God really did love her, cared for her, and had not abandoned her

Jesus who had preached: “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted” was now clearly manifesting the first part of that century-old quote in both word and deed, despite predating it by almost 19 centuries! ‘Comfort the afflicted.’ Here we see the Pastoral ministry of Jesus.

Afflict the comfortable

What about ‘afflicting the comfortable’- is this evident in Jesus’ ministry?

Consider the Synagogue Ruler in this account. See how he responded to the ‘comforting’ ministry of Jesus.

Here we find a man who appears very comfortable in his position of power and authority over the religious institution of his day. He also seems very comfortable in his dogmatic understanding of religious rules concerning work and Sabbath.

When it came to Jesus’ work of compassionate healing on the Sabbath, that pushed the synagogue ruler right out of his comfort zone- as such behaviour went way off-limits, and was considered totally unacceptable, breaking the religious rule. He was some so comfortable in his smug convictions that he almost begged to be ‘afflicted in his comfort’!

Jesus doesn’t disappoint us in this regard. He immediately moves from his ministry of showing comfort and compassion to the ministry of challenge and confrontation! “You hypocrites..” he accuses them!

He points out in no uncertain terms that this woman deserves her healing far more than the donkeys whose needs are always attended to – as much on the Sabbath as on any other day!

Jesus makes it quite clear that the afflicted woman needs and deserves the comfort of his healing touch – and at the same time does not shy away from ‘afflicting the comfortable’ religious leaders with his challenge to them concerning their hypocrisy and uncaring attitude towards the woman.

So how might we as the church follow the example of Jesus in exercising BOTH these ministries?

Unfortunately in our country we don’t have to look too far in finding examples of people in positions of leadership and power who fit the description of the hypocrites! Consider for eg people in Governments and Municipal leadership. As part of election campaigns we are given eloquent promises of alleviation of poverty, job creation, improvements in matters of health, education and housing, and of course- service delivery. All the politically correct talk- how they will serve the community and act in the best interests of their constituency.

Yet those same leaders are caught up in cases of corruption, fraud.. While the poor continue to get poorer, their houses and cars get bigger and bigger. While the levels of unemployment increase, their salaries get larger and larger. All this wonderful talk seems to result in their pockets getting fuller as they feather their own nests at the expense of those they claim to serve. While water flows freely in their luxury homes, a large cross-section of Grahamstown is left without water for days at a time. Perhaps the recent march led by Rhodes academics and other concerned citizens to the Grahamstown municipality was an example of the ministry of “afflicting the comfortable’- holding them accountable for not living up to their promises.

In the apartheid years, the church (especially the Anglican church) was known to be vocal in exposing injustices and hypocrisy. We frequently heard the voices of church leaders challenging the powers that be in speaking out against all forms of wrong. Perhaps we have lost something of our prophetic voice- our ministry of challenge and confrontation? Maybe we need to re-learn what it means to follow Jesus in his ministry of 'afflicting the comfortable'.

On the other hand, I suspect that it is easy and natural for most of us to seek to bring comfort to those among our families, friends, fellow parishoners etc whose lives have been afflicted by failing health, financial difficulties, emotional or spiritual challenges. I am sure that many of us long to be used more by God in being an instrument of his love, comfort and healing to others. As you know, at all our services there is an opportunity for anyone to receive Prayer Ministry. It is my constant prayer that we as the Cathedral family might grow and deepen in our pastoral care for one another. May we never grow weary of being those who affirm, encourage and support one another.

Far more difficult, especially with people close to us, is to know when and how to 'afflict' them when they are too comfortable...how to challenge them when their misplaced comfort leads them to act counter to their deep needs, and the deep needs of others.

When a relative says hurtful things to another family member; a friend gives us the cold shoulder and refuses to answer phone calls; a church member undermines the church leadership or acts inappropriately or speaks rudely; a fellow Christian makes sexual advances on another member of the congregation or behaves inappropriately towards them; when someone we respect steps out of line in the way they speak to others or what they do;then how do we respond? Gently but firmly challenging them on their 'bad behaviour' is often very uncomfortable, awkward.

I suspect that most of us find the ministry of 'afflicting the comfortable' when it involves people we know well SO uncomfortable, we would rather avoid it like the plague or find any excuse to side step it altogether- or pass the buck to someone else! It is NOT a ministry that will make us popular! Sometimes perhaps we even go so far as to soothe the ruffled feathers of the people acting out, to placate or appease them with a superficial comfort that feels good in the short term but in the long term only serves to enable further acting out.

The challenge for each one of us is to find appropriate and helpful ways to speak the truth in love to our brothers and sisters who sin against us/ who sin against others/ who sin against our shared Christian values, morals and ideals.

So even as we offer healing and deep comfort to those around us, we must also call out behaviour that is harmful and out of bounds, while continuing to affirm them as people we love.

Our gospel reading today shows us that the ministry of Jesus involves both healing and confrontation, and this is a ministry that we as Christians are called to follow. It is not always easy to hold these two aspects of ministry together! It requires humility, compassion, conviction, courage, wisdom. It requires discernment to know when it is time to 'comfort the afflicted' or to 'afflict the comfortable'.

May God give us the grace to be faithful to our calling, that we might live out this ministry with clarity, conviction and especially with love. May we encourage and challenge one another to become more fully the people God wants us to be! Amen.

Acknowledgements; Rev Erica Posa UU Christian Fellowship 2008 for the theme "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable"