

SERMON: THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: GEOFF CHADWICK
14/6/2026 PENTECOST 2 (OS11a): MATTHEW 9:35-10:8:
“COMPASSION FATIGUE”

Matthew 9.35-10.8

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’ ¹ Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

When Matthew compiled his Gospel, he used the first verses in today’s Gospel reading as a “short-hand” description of Jesus’ ministry. It’s a mini-gospel within the gospel. Here it is again:

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Mtt 9:35-36, NRSV)

It’s helpful to know this verse if you ever get asked why you are a follower of Jesus. It speaks of him at the human level, which may be all that people can manage at the time. Divine things may come later.

Now there’s a challenge. This ministry of Jesus, whilst begun by him, does not end with him. He handed it on to his first disciples, and by implication it’s handed on to us as well. We too are called to this ministry of compassion.

I don't know if you know, but the Greek word used here for compassion is *splagchnizomai*, which is one of my favourite words. It literally means "to feel it in the guts". The English translation is a bit too nice. A better rendering would be:

Jesus was deeply moved in the guts, for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Mtt 9:36)

Have you ever felt it in the guts?

Have you ever been so deeply moved that you've suffered more than heartache; you've suffered "gut ache" as well?

Have you ever arrived at a situation where the people were like sheep without a shepherd?

What did you do?

I remember a time where I was asked to officiate at the funeral for a teenaged girl who had been killed in an horrific accident. When I arrived at the home to make the arrangements it was bedlam. There was a TV media van parked on the lawn and reporters trying to get a story. The house was crowded with people offering advice and large quantities of alcohol to "drown their sorrows".

And so, I took charge. I found the most respected looking friend and told him to announce that the minister was here to make the funeral arrangements and that they should all leave.

And they all did! There's nothing like a clergyperson's arrival to clear a room!

I sat, with the parents, whom I knew, and said two simple words in the kind of language I knew they would understand (please forgive my slang):

"This sux!"

And so our grieving work began.

We must remember that Jesus entered into a world where being harassed and feeling helpless were a way of life. Under Roman occupation, life was difficult. Fear, corruption, coercion

and violence permeated everything. I'm sure you are well aware of this. These are present in the background of the whole New Testament. Scratch under the surface and you are sure to find the influence of fear, corruption, coercion and violence.

The people were "Harassed and helpless" on every side. They knew no peace.

So are we up for the challenge? To take on the mantle of Jesus' compassion. To walk into the lives of harassed and helpless people?

Of course we are!

But then again, maybe not.

Compassion has its limits!

I wonder if you've suffered from compassion fatigue? It's not uncommon. We see so many worthy causes that we ironically we end up feeling harassed and helpless. So in the end we become tired of it and we become numb to the concerns of others.

There's a telling scene in the movie *Jesus Christ Superstar*. You may know it. There's a point where the needy are approaching Jesus for healing. It begins with an individual then grows into a trickle. It then becomes a crowd, then finally an unruly mob. There's a song, and the lyrics go like this:

[LEPERS]

See my eyes, I can hardly see

See me stand, I can hardly walk

I believe you can make me whole

See my tongue, I can hardly talk

See my skin, I'm a mass of blood

See my legs, I can hardly stand

I believe you can make me well

See my purse, I'm a poor poor man

Will you touch, will

you mend me, Christ?

Won't you touch, will

you heal me, Christ?

Will you kiss, you can cure me, Christ?

Won't you kiss, won't

you pay me, Christ?

[LEPERS](JESUS)

*(There's too many of you;)
See my eyes, I can hardly see
See me stand, I can hardly walk
(don't push me)
I believe you can make me whole
See my tongue, I can hardly talk*

*(There's too little of me);
See my skin, I'm a mass of blood
See my legs, I can hardly stand
I believe you can make me well
See my purse, I'm a poor poor man*

*(don't crowd me)
Will you touch, will
you mend me, Christ?
Won't you touch, will
you heal me, Christ?
Will you kiss, you can cure me, Christ?
Won't you kiss, won't
you pay me, Christ?*

*[JESUS]
Heal yourselves!*

https://www.smule.com/song/jesus-christ-superstar-1-8-the-temple-the-lepers-karaoke-lyrics/6293532_6293532/arrangement

It's suggesting, that even Jesus, in his humanity, was overcome by people's overwhelming needs. It's suggesting that even Jesus, like us, succumbed to compassion fatigue.

You may not agree with this, but it reminds us, at least, that we are human, and we are limited in our capacity to care. Our "guts" can only take so much. We too wish to cry out "*Heal yourselves!*"

So should we give up? Should we let our fatigue bring us to inaction. I think not.

Again, we have the Gospel story to assist us.

We must remember that Jesus is the Saviour of the world – not us! We cannot do it all!

But we can pick up the broken pieces of people's lives small piece by small piece.

We can order unruly mourners out of a chaotic household.

We can visit a sick neighbour in hospital.

We can give our house-key to the friend who needs a refuge from domestic violence.

We can give some of our income to a favoured agency.

We can listen to someone's difficult story!

We can listen to the wisdom of our guts!

And if anyone asks:

Who you do these things, just say

I'm doing what Jesus asked: to show some compassion.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.