

ADDRESS “Compassion, what is it?”

The idea for today’s sermon was first introduced to me at our General Assembly Meetings last year, held in Swansea. A motion was put that the General Assembly should support the Charter for Compassion and this was unanimously agreed upon. Compassion and Love are very common themes for services anyway, but in the past year I think one effect of this Resolution has been to increase the frequency of services such as this.

What is the Charter for Compassion? It is a call to put compassion at the heart of all individual and social relationships, at the heart of all religious and ethical decisions and actions. The Wording of the Charter itself was a year-long venture involving a world wide consultation of people of many faiths, but it was started in 2008 by a remarkable religious scholar, Karen Armstrong.

Karen Armstrong is a scholar of religions, with particular expertise in Islam, who believes that all major religions share important insights as well as having unique traditions. She identifies the Golden Rule as the key area of overlap and she has written a study book to support the Charter aims called *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. In this she draws on a wide range of material, from the spiritualities of the various religions to the findings of contemporary neuroscience. She argues that, “Compassion is hard wired into our brains, yet is constantly

restrained by our more primitive instincts for selfishness and survival". She sees the Golden Rule ("Always treat others as you wish to be treated yourself.") as a test of true spirituality. We should show respect and kindness to others whether they worship God, Brahman, Nirvana, or Tao [Dow] and whether their skin is black, white, or yellow. Our main aim in life is to build a global community in which peoples can live together in mutual respect. Yet so much conflict in the world is attributed to religion: major wars in history have been caused by religions through disrespect, greed, envy and ambition. In recent years we have seen terrorists using their faith to justify atrocities such as the terrorist attacks on New York and London, not to mention communal riots in India, Pakistan and elsewhere. Armstrong wants religions to play positive roles in the future of humanity and believes that the key lies in rediscovering the value of compassion and putting it at the centre of our decisions.

But what is this Compassion that the Charter talks about? I'd like to start to answer this question by telling you about one of my experiences as a Social Worker, when I supervised a Parolee. Since he came from Glasgow, let's call him 'Jimmie'. [pause....]

Jimmie had spent most of his life in prison, being convicted of a double murder. When he was released into my care he had no family connections. He had been rejected as a father, husband,

brother, and uncle due to his misdeeds. Jimmie was then 65 years old and appeared much older than his years. He suffered health problems. He had no finances, no home, he was alone in the outside world. I was the only contact available for him. Every morning he would walk some 10 miles to my office to talk to me. We would sit and talk about future plans. What plans! He was retirement age with no work experience, with no money to travel or go on holidays. He lived alone in a small rented flat, with nothing to do and nowhere to go. I was his link with the outside world. I was responsible for trying to help Jimmie to try and find a life after being incarcerated for so many years. I had to show compassion to this elderly man - concern and respect that recognized he had done wrong and was punished for it but I was not there to judge him. It is easy to be judgmental to someone who has killed someone else, but being compassionate, while it doesn't ignore history, draws on the potential for change/ improvement in the future. Showing compassion can sometimes be hard, but everyone needs a helping hand.

I did feel empathy for this man. It might have been easier for him to live the remainder of his life in the institution of prison, rather than being in a lonely environment that had undergone many changes since his last liberation some 26 years previous. Although it was my duty as his Parole Officer to make practical arrangements

for him, compassion goes much further. I could have limited my time and concerns but felt the need to show compassion by listening to him and showing interest in his life. Unfortunately, this story does not have a happy ending. Within months Jimmie had died of heart disease - or was it perhaps the shock of living in a lonely, unwelcome world.

So what is compassion?

People often think it means pity or feeling sorry for people. But the word 'compassion' comes from a Greek/Latin root that means to endure something with another person. That means putting yourself imaginatively in other people's shoes and not just seeing things from your own blinkered and often self-interested perspective.

In ordinary use, compassion seems very 'Buddhist' - we remember stories about how the Buddha is called the Compassionate One because he saw the sufferings of the world and had compassion; he did not go off to enjoy the fruits of his enlightenment but chose to stay around and help others achieve enlightenment. And because we also associate meditation with Eastern religion, we think of compassion as a kind of calmness - almost the opposite of passion! So how does this tie in with the word used more in the Christian tradition, Love (or Charity as the King James Bible says it)?

In the Christian religion even the most secular among us will remember the story of the Good Samaritan, which was used to illustrate the teaching that among all the many laws of Judaism, the central commandments were to love God, to love yourself, and to love other people. This is sometimes referred to as the Two Great Commandments: Love God and Love other People - but in fact, there is a third Commandment hidden in the story: Love Yourself ! In her book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Armstrong writes, “If you cannot love yourself, you cannot love others, either”.

So while it is wrong to completely link two ideas from different traditions and cultures, there is enough in common for us to make sense of ‘compassion’ by thinking ‘love’, where we remember that Christian teaching of love is not about self-centeredness but about other-centeredness; not about wanting to acquire things or status but about willingness to sacrifice; not about being puffed up (as Paul put it) but about being humble, about forgiving. Loving one’s enemies can be extremely difficult, both as an individual and as a society, but we sometimes make this advice impossible to follow by thinking of it as liking everybody. Love isn’t liking, it’s a determination to work for another’s welfare.

Armstrong gives the example from the Chinese sage, Confucius. The word he used was ‘consideration’, which was the

key value to the reciprocal relationships he taught as the foundation for society. She attributes to him the first formulation of the Golden Rule.

So: compassion, love, consideration, respect, caring: this kind of living is not easy. It requires dedication, practice, skill, even discipline. Her book, *Twelve Steps*, is actually a manual for discipline to change one's life in a certain direction - not just to SEE things differently, but to DO things differently by becoming aware of our relationships. Armstrong says, "you cannot learn to swim by sitting by the side of the pool and watching others".

The essence of relating to other people with compassion involves a non-judgmental respect for their individuality and an understanding of the basic humanity you both share.

The GA Worship Panel has published its own collection of worship materials for services on the Charter and two of them by Unitarian ministers are particularly helpful at this point:

Rev Richard Boeke puts compassion in the context of working for world peace, but before I read it I'd like to say a few words about Richard. When John and I were on our Honeymoon in India and visiting the Khasi Hills Unitarians as part of this, Richard was there at the same time and for some days we were a threesome as we visited various Unitarian congregations and schools in the area, escorted by Carleywell Lyngdoh, the General Secretary of the Khasi

Unitarians. Richard writes:

“Peace making was the ongoing dream of peacemakers Gandhi and Martin Luther King. They wanted Peace for the communities from Libya to Lebanon, from Pakistan to The Philippines, but wars still continue today. Here the work of Compassion is forgiveness. Bitterness imprisons life, love releases it. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate”. End quote.

Rev David Monk, looking at the Buddhist recognition of the universality of suffering, comments:

“The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh [Tich Naat Haan] refers to the ‘door’ of compassion as the door of the heart. It is a central belief with religious traditions the world over, that within all people is a heart of compassion. Sadly, the door is often closed, preventing any ‘movement out’. It is closed because people are so wounded by many of their life experiences, often from a very early age, that the only way they believe they can survive is to deny or repress the suffering in themselves. When the door of the heart is opened, this personal suffering is exposed. If there is a willingness to acknowledge and ‘own’ this suffering the heart moves out to others who are suffering. Compassion is a way of relating to others in their suffering which comes from acknowledging and embracing the

suffering in oneself.” End quote.

Karen Armstrong believes our world is dangerously polarized, caused by the imbalance of wealth and power, which is giving concerns of increased rage, alienation and humiliation that have encouraged terrorists to cause a threat to us all. Religions are often ignoring the suffering and exploitation that they cause while stressing perceived injustices they suffer.

Armstrong fears for the ongoing conflict between the Arabs and Israelis; that there is no solution for their problems, and eventually this conflict may spread to other parts of the world. She says, “If our religious and ethical traditions fail to address this challenge, they will fail the test for our time”.

To bring these thoughts from the global stage back to our own ordinary lives, how many of us harbour and even nurture bad feelings from bad experiences? By not letting go, these bad feelings embitter our own well-being and often lead to health problems. If we cannot forgive and move on from our problems then the fellowship of a church community loses its ability to change us. And if there is one great need which both church people and church communities have, it is change. In our Unitarian congregations one way of exercising compassion is to see the common humanity that links us. At times we are all lonely; at times we are all in need of forgiveness; at times each one of us hurts someone else and regrets

it; at times we put our own desires above the common good. The honest respect and caring that should be part of the very fabric of church community can heal us and open us, if compassion is given room.

In a meditative prayer I have used for many of my ‘Women’s League’ services, based on God speaking from the burning bush and saying “My Name is I AM”, the meditation reflects that “I am not in the past; I am not in the future; but if you want God or the Spirit to listen to you, he or she is here in the present”. It is the here and now we must concentrate on. We may well be overwhelmingly surprised by the power of the spirit to change us when we open the door to our heart. Amen.