

Over the last few years, a feature of our Fete has been the various games overseen by our Youth Clubs that are set up near the entrance. One year there was a large game of Jenga. The game begins with a tower constructed of simple smooth oblong blocks. One by one the players remove the blocks until the removal of one of them causes the tower to collapse.

It is a game of inter-connectedness – the lower blocks all supporting the ones above. It is also a game of instability and weakening as more and more of the blocks are withdrawn.

I thought of this as I reflected on the passage we read from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. As I said last week, he is developing his thoughts on spiritual gifts in the context of the unity of the body. Every part has its place and no part is unimportant. As I was growing up the Bishop of Birmingham was Bishop Leonard Wilson. He used to visit our School from time to time and, even though I had no interest in faith at that time, his humanity always made an impression on me. He used to take the Remembrance Service in the Albert Hall on the eve of Remembrance Sunday and I recall my mother one year telling me of something of the history of the man. He was Bishop of Singapore at the outbreak of the Second World War and was taken prisoner by the Japanese and tortured. In the years after the war he visited the commander of the camp in which he was held prisoner and held out the hand of reconciliation. In the camps he had a ministry of simple compassion to those who were suffering alongside him.

What are we talking about when we see that word compassion. Compassion has its roots not just in an external sympathy with another but rather an identification with another in their suffering. It is about the connection between the heart of my being and the heart of yours – and then following that connection. Compassion is about that interconnectedness that lies at the heart of the image of the body that Paul is using as he writes to the Church at Corinth.

I came across the following way of looking at compassion as the courage to see, the courage to feel and the courage to act.

The courage to see; this is to see beyond our own self interest, our own immediate concerns; to see the needs of the other, the one who is different. The great challenge to see our connection to those who seem to be different to us –the individuals or groups whose life style we cannot understand, the traveller, the refugee, the addict, the prisoner – we share a common humanity, we are connected by that common humanity.

So there is the courage to see;. There is also the courage to feel – to really enter into the hurt, the pain of the other. In Luke’s Gospel we read of Jesus coming across a funeral procession as a widow prepares to bury her only son. (*Luke 7:13*) Our English text says that Jesus ‘had compassion for her’. The Greek in which this passage was originally written is far more evocative. ἐσπλαγχνίσθη – the root of that word refers to our bowels, our very innards –our Lord was moved to the very core of his being.

I recall towards the end of my time in Ahoghill, a young man took his own life – understandably his parents and sister were devastated. A few days later, his father told me of a neighbour he barely knew approaching him in the street, simply shaking him by the hand and saying, ‘My heart is hurting for you.’ There was a connectedness, there was the courage to feel another man’s grief. This reminds me that we carry deep within us for one another the blessing of God.

We have looked at the way of compassion as the courage to see, the courage to feel – there is then the courage to act.

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. *1 John 3:16-18*

One of the best known of Jesus' parables is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In the story all three, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan see the wounded man by the side of the road. It is quite possible that all three feel a basic sympathy. But only one made a connection, only one followed through in open ended action, stooping down, bandaging his wounds, taking him to an inn. I go back to that description of compassion I gave earlier: It is about the connection between the heart of my being and the heart of yours – and then following that connection.

I said that Paul was talking about gifts – and I have been talking about connectedness in the body, in the community. In truth we cannot talk about exercise of gifts apart from our connectedness in the community. As I remarked last Sunday, we are all endowed with carisma, with gifts to be shared, to be exercised in the Body that is the Church. Every gift, every person is valuable. We are stronger for your presence, we are weaker in your absence.

To go back to our Jenga tower. With several bricks taken out, it may still stand but it is weaker, it is more fragile.

‘No single one of us is all important. But each one of us is essential’.

May we as we gather in this place, in all our difference, in all our diversity, recognise in each one of us a particular gift of God to his Church and may we each offer ourselves,

our souls and bodies

to be a living sacrifice.

Send us out in the power of your Spirit

to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.