

The Gift Of Giving

CULTIVATING A HEART OF COMPASSION

I remember exactly how it happened. I was teaching at Holy Cross Intermediate School in Ifield. I started teaching there in January 1990 - and what I remember so vividly happened sometime in 1991.

I went with my class to the School assembly. On this particular day there was a man who had been invited to speak to the children - that was great it meant, as staff, we didn't have to prepare anything for this assembly. I sat there and listened to this man, whom I had never met, talking about what he and some people he knew were doing. The more he talked the more uncomfortable I became, not because he was boring or uninteresting, not because what he was talking about was inappropriate, not because what he was saying was irrelevant – in fact I was amazed at what he was talking about. He was talking about Crawley – the town where I now lived.

He was talking about a lady called Mad Mary – whom most of the children knew. She was a lady who lived rough and walked around with bags on her head – literally – pushing a shopping trolley through the town. She was always talking to herself and would sometimes shout at people or just shout. He talked of people being homeless and sleeping rough. He talked about feeding and helping these kinds of people. He talked about the work of the Easter Team. He explained that there were people, Christians in Crawley, who's hearts were full of compassion and who were prepared to do something to help those most vulnerable. I sat there stunned.

I wasn't stunned because of the work of the Easter Team. I was stunned because what slowly dawned on me was that I claimed to be a Christian, but in truth I realised that I didn't care. I didn't really care that there were people sleeping rough, not having enough to eat, feeling lonely and vulnerable, and not coping with life. Helpless, forgotten, ignored and living in Crawley, where I lived. I was

shocked - shocked to the point that something moved in me. I found out who this man was and where he lived and I visited him and found out how to become a part of the Easter Team. That day I woke to the truth that, if I was to follow Christ, then I had to cultivate a heart of compassion - and do something.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right. ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When did we see you and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” Matthew 25 v 31 -46.

An elderly woman was evicted from a hotel for transients because she couldn't pay the rent. Next morning they found her body in a car park. With the body was a note which read: “I have nowhere to go, and there is no-one to understand. God is not dead. He is only sleeping, but sleeping very soundly.”

Around the building we have these words: "He has no hands but our hands".
How soundly is God asleep in you?

200 years ago a 15 year old girl was taken by her wealthy father past a notorious women's prison. The girl was shocked by the sight of inmates desperately reaching out through the bars as they begged for help. She wrote in her diary: "If this is the world, where is God?" Two years later this girl gave her life to Christ. She was inspired by the example of Jesus and how he spent his earthly life reaching out to the lost, marginalised, the outcast and the poor. She was challenged by Jesus' words: "whatever you did for one of these brothers and sisters of mine..." She went, at the age of 17, to walk among the poor. She came to the conclusion that if Christ was alive then she was his hands and feet in the everyday trenches of life.

In 1813 she heard about Newgate Prison for Women – which had been described as a living hell. Ravaged with disease, an average of 5 women died every month. They had no clothing, no beds, no heat, no baths. One visitor described it like entering a pen of wild beasts. Against all advice she went to visit the prison and spoke to the inmates. She asked them: "Would you be pleased if someone were to come and save you?" They replied: "And just where would we find such a friend?" "I am your friend" she said - and so she began to talk to the prisoners – returning time after time.

She had seen – from one visit – how responsive the desperate people were to the love of Christ. She organised other Christians to help around the clock – providing practical things, teaching the Bible, training the women, building friendships. Many inmates came to Christ and over time Newgate Prison was transformed. The girl set up the Protestant Sisters of Charity – and it spread causing the government in England and Europe to pass laws to treat prisoners humanely. That girl was Elizabeth Fry.

The man who gave his testimony at the Good Friday Act of witness – the ex-drug dealer and user came to faith because his wife went on an Alpha course. Years ago Lisa and I and the Easter Team used to visit Debbie – the lady who is now his wife, taking her food parcels, listening to her story and helping her where we

could. Years later, through Broadfield Fellowship she came to faith on an Alpha course. Her life and her now husband's life have been transformed!

I guess we cannot help but be moved by inspiring stories of people like Elizabeth Fry and those who started the Easter Team. How do people move to such places of compassion? Well, perhaps it is because they have a heart that has been revolutionised by Jesus. Philip Yancey said that people who meet Jesus never stayed the same. How's your heart?

Elizabeth Fry's sister wrote this after Elizabeth gave her life to Christ: 'There was a most marked change in her. The Bible became her study, visiting the poor, her great objective. To us, she was now always amiable and patient, fore-bearing and humble.... She was really and truly awakening to a new life in Christ.'¹

How are we growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? How are you living your true colours in Christ? How are you growing in stewardship? How are you using all the various resources that he has so generously lavished upon you? How much do you choose to invest in things of eternal value, or do you keep them for yourself? How much is Jesus' priority for the poor your priority? Jesus said he had come to bring good news to the poor? What do you suppose he meant? What kind of news do you bring to the poor?

Elizabeth Fry and the founders of the Easter Team had their Father's heart, and also their Father's eyes! Amy Grant wrote a song with the title: 'Father's eyes'. The song said that what the writer wanted most was that people would say that "she has her Father's eyes." That she could see the world in the way that her heavenly Father saw it. Elizabeth Fry and the founders of the Easter Team could see the needs of others because they took the time to see as God sees.

Perhaps it is the art of noticing – noticing those around us and what is going on. Among the people you routinely bump into, might there be hidden, sometimes a deeply hidden, need? Might some people be quietly desperate, on the brink of financial collapse or emotional breakdown? What about the people sitting next to you? What if we learned to see differently in our everyday lives – to see with

fresh eyes – our Father’s eyes? You will probably not be able to meet every need you see – but some perhaps you could, and you may be able to direct people to where they might find help. “Whatever you did for one of the least of these.....”

Elizabeth Fry and the founders of the Easter Team put their feet where Jesus put his feet. They had no desire to remain comfortable. They intentionally walked into new places – among the poor and the marginalised – people they would not normally encounter – just as Jesus did. Jesus intentionally walked into places where the religious people of his day would not go. Where do your feet take you?

Elizabeth Fry’s feet took her to Newgate Prison. The founders of the Easter Team walked into the town centre of Crawley. Do you always take the safe route and live only in the comfort of your surroundings? When was the last time you ventured into something new, something uncomfortable or unfamiliar – a place where you might find the forgotten people? Question is – are you willing?

It takes the movement of our feet and a willingness to let our eyes see to cultivate a heart of compassion. Friends, God is not asleep, but sometimes we are!

Elizabeth Fry died in 1845 with a heart full to the brim. The more she poured out in service, the more God filled it to overflowing. I’ve attended the funerals of two of the founders of the Easter Team, Steve and Maurice. One I knew well because Maurice had spoken in that assembly. I was profoundly touched as I heard testimony to their lives of service, lived out in response to hearts moved by the gospel.

Jesus said: “I have not come to be served, but to serve.” It’s a great upside down truth – in serving we find fulfilment. What is good news to the poor? You are!

1. Willow Creek Resources: *“Giving: unlocking the heart of good stewardship,”* Zondervan 2000, page 94