

JESUS COMFORTS AND ENCOURAGES: 14TH SUNDAY A

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One of the most wonderful things about the person of Jesus has been and continues to be, his special love for ordinary people – for people like us. It comes out in two beautiful statements that he makes today. The first is in his prayer to God: *'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children.'* The second is in his Invitation: *'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest.'*

What leads him to say these things? He has just completed a tour of the towns and villages of Galilee. In all of them he has preached the truth that God is the King of the whole world, and so everyone must know, love and serve God as the Lord and Ruler of their lives. On many occasions too he has made the kingdom of God happen, by curing sick people and setting them free from their handicaps, disabilities and afflictions. But it's only the ordinary, everyday people who have appreciated his efforts, accepted his message and begun to follow him. The educated and clever have simply closed their minds and hearts to him, and walked away with their noses in the air.

For the sake of developing our own personal relationship with Jesus, let us dip a little today into his relationship with those whom he called *'the poor'* and *'the little ones'*! They are the same ones whom the high and mighty Pharisees called *'sinners'* or *'the rabble who know nothing of the law'*. We might refer to them today as *'the oppressed'*, *'the strugglers'*, and *'the battlers'*.

In the gospels, the term *'poor'* doesn't refer only to those who had little or no money, even though it does include them. In the first place the poor were those who had to beg for a living. Of course in that society there were no hospitals, no Centrelink, and no pensions. So the blind, the deaf and dumb, the lame, the paralysed, the cripples and the lepers were generally beggars.

The economically poor included the day-labourers who were often without work, the peasants who worked on the farms of wealthy landowners, and those who were slaves. Then there were the widows and the orphans, who had no way of earning a living and no one to provide for them. They depended on occasional handouts from the Temple treasury.

The poor that Jesus knew found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, with no prestige, no power, and no honour. They were social outcasts, and left to feel that their lives were without dignity, meaningless and hopeless. Their principal suffering, then as now, was their embarrassment at being totally dependent upon others.

People of the middle class (the educated and the law-abiding, such as the scribes and Pharisees), generally treated them as low-class scum, and even spoke of them as 'sinners'. They didn't even have the consolation of feeling they were in God's good books, because their social superiors kept telling them that they were displeasing to God, and surely *'they ought to know'*! So these so-called 'sinners' felt terrible frustration, shame, guilt, anxiety and misery.

But Jesus was different, strikingly different. As a carpenter, a *'tradie'*, he was from the middle class himself and not one of the poor and oppressed. But he mixed socially with even the poorest of the poor. So much so that he became an outcast by choice, and even got the nick-name *'the friend of sinners'*.

Why did he do this? The answer comes across very clearly in the gospels, and may be summed up in just one word - COMPASSION. For example: - The plight and tears of the widow of Nain touches his heart to the core: *'Don't cry,'* he says to her, before bringing her son back to life. He is moved with compassion at the plight of a leper begging for help (Mk 4:41), for two blind men sitting at the side of a road and pleading for mercy (Mt 20:29-34), and for a crowd of people with nothing to eat (Mk 8:2). In each case he responds to their sufferings with the power, love, compassion and care of God.

All through the gospels, even when the word is not used, we sense the surge of compassion rising within his heart. *'Don't cry,'* he says, *'Don't worry,'* *'Don't be afraid'* (e.g. Mk 5:36; 6:50; Mt 6:25-34). He is not moved by the grandeur and beauty of the great Temple buildings (Mk 13:1-2), but by the generosity of a poor widow who puts her last cent into the Temple treasury to assist others (Mk 12:41-44). When everyone else around him is jumping for joy about Jairus' daughter come back to life, Jesus is concerned that she be given something to eat (Mk 5:42-43).

Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon once wrote: *'Life is mostly froth and bubble. Two things stand like stone, kindness in another's trouble, courage in your own!'* The kindness and compassion of Jesus were the most human and humane things about him. They are the most human and humane things about us too.

So, whose side are we on? On the side of Jesus, the side of compassion, kindness, help, healing, and mercy? Or on the side of the scribes and Pharisees then and now - fierce, fault-finding, heartless, critical, and merciless? Will we take our cue from their cruel, harsh, and insensitive judgments and actions? Or will we take our inspiration from what we see in Jesus, and from his touching outreach to the poor and the broken: *'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest'*?