

In the back streets of Poplar in the East end of London many years ago a little boy was bored. So he went to his Mum and said, "Mum I'm bored," and holding up a rather battered creature said, "and teddy's bored too. What can we do Mum? Eh Mum?" Well Mum knew the pattern only too well and in a sharp way said "Oh go to the pictures!" Now this seemed a good idea even for a little boy with no money. So off he went, dragging teddy with him.

Eventually he got to a busy road where he stood and looked and waited. Teddy wasn't much help as he only had one eye and could only look one way. Then a pair of black boots appeared at the bottom of a pair of navy blue trousers. "Hello where are you going?" "Pictures" "Got any money?" "No" "Where do you live?" "Don't know." "You come with me."

So off they went to the police station where the boy was fed with chocolate to induce him to say where he lived. But he soon got wise to that and the more he got the less he knew.

By now mother was missing her little boy. So she went to the end of the road and shouted for him, "Dougie", but no son. She went round to her neighbours but he was nowhere to be found. So the neighbours moved into action. Everything was dropped in the search. Nothing else was important, dad's dinner or anything. A little while later a panic stricken Mum arrived at the police station to find her son in a Cadbury's induced stupor being quizzed by the police.

I heard that story from an evangelist named Doug Barnett who was central in me coming to faith. But I tell it this morning because it is about people caring for others, caring for the boy, for a neighbour. It is about people sharing in the search and being united in their care and concern. The story reminds us that people matter more than any thing and in being people focussed those neighbours were caring, sharing and united and it is this I want us to think about this morning as we look at the church as people focussed.

To help us think it through we are going to look at this passage to see just how people focussed Jesus was and how that encouraged his disciples and through them us to be caring, sharing and united.

1. Jesus' care for his disciples

If we look at vs 30-31 we see firstly his care for his disciples.

They have had a busy time out and about preaching and so on. Now they have come back together and are having a debrief session. However, it is clear from v31 that they are in a busy place – a bit like trying to have a chat in the welcome area on a Monday morning, while coffee and co is happening. Jesus assessed the situation and the disciples and, in his care for them, encouraged them to come away from the bustle to find some rest.

Here we see Jesus care for his disciples. He understood how they felt and he cared about it. He was concerned for their well being. After all they were important to him and to the Kingdom of God. These were the ones who would continue his ministry and mission. Of course he was concerned for his closest friends. In this Jesus sets us a good example to follow in the way we deal with and care for friends in the church. He was not taking them for granted. He was sensitive to how they were and their needs seem to come before his own.

He was people focussed and his church should be people focussed.

Those of us who lead teams in the church we need to make sure that we are sensitive to our team, to their situation and needs. It is so easy if someone can't fulfil a task or perhaps drops out to feel let down and to feel upset with the person. It is easy, especially with those who are willing, to load more and more on to them and not sense when they need to rest. I am encouraging those of us in leadership roles to be sensitive to those with whom we are working and sharing ministry, to seek to care for them in the best way possible.

But then generally we as a church should be caring for each other – that's part of the role of the Area Groups that we established earlier in the year. The aim to be people focussed and to say that just as the disciples and their well being mattered to Jesus so others in the church should matter to us. We should be sensitive, sensitive to the person who always seems to be on their own, sensitive to the person struggling with young children or with old age, looking out for the needs of others rather than pursuing our own agenda.

Friends can I just ask that as a church we are people focussed and we grow in caring for each member not just some.

I was talking to a friend in the week and he described how he went to a church he'd been to a number of times before. He sat in a pew next to some people who before the service chatted to each other. At the end he waited to see if the person next to him would turn to chat to him but they didn't. Instead they turned away and spoke again to the other person.

Now he's a big boy and able to take it but it didn't show a caring attitude. I know this is only one example but to be quite honest if I can't share a few words with my fellow Christian then I'm certainly going to struggle to share their burden, their load, their cares.

Jesus was positive in showing care for his disciples I would encourage us all who count ourselves members here to be doing the same to the other members.

How did he show that care?

Seeing them tired and bothered by the crowds he said "come away with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest".

Sounds great doesn't it? They have been busy, there are lots of people around they need a break – let's go somewhere quiet. Let's go up in the hills or out into the countryside. Actually he told them to come with him to a desolate place, to the wilderness. The importance it would seem was not the beauty of the place they were going to but the fact that they, having been working, were resting. Here is part of Jesus care in understanding their need for rest.

That shouldn't surprise us for Jesus is God and God has set rest into the pattern of the world. We have seen this many times in recent years – the importance of rest. It was one of our Lifeshapes, the semi circle. Through which we learnt the importance of balance in our lives and the balance of resting to work. Daily, weekly, monthly and annually we need rest so we can then work.

Jesus cared for his disciples and called them to rest so that they might be ready for work.

The care was shown by the leader in a directive way and for some of us that may be the same. We may, as leaders of a group or team, need to show care by speaking to someone and encouraging them in a course of action, or, as here, inaction. How can we say we care for people if we see some issues in their lives and are not prepared at least to chat it through with them? Of course we are not going to be right all the time and we don't know the full situation but in love at least to open up the issue is surely to show we care.

But of course Jesus didn't just care by saying have some rest he showed he cared by saying come away with me. He drew them to himself. He gave them the opportunity to abide in him.

We show caring by giving people our time and in many other ways but also by helping people share time with Jesus. I am so grateful to those who lead homegroups because they enable others to draw aside and to spend time with each other and with Jesus. The same is true of those involved in Lightcatchers, in our youth work, Fellowship group and so on.

Caring is not just about giving people time, or space, or practical help but about drawing people closer to Jesus.

This is the second aspect of the semi-circle from life shapes. It is not just sufficient to rest so we can work we should also seek to abide in Jesus so we can grow and be fruitful as his disciples.

Jesus cared for his disciples by helping them rest, by giving them time, but above all by drawing them closer to himself.

2. Jesus' care for people

So Jesus and the disciples went off but were followed by the crowd. v34, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

He looked at this mass of humanity and had compassion on them. He cared for them all. The word compassion is an unusual word and a very strong word. It is associated with the guts. Elsewhere it is translated his heart went out to her or he had pity on him but even that doesn't get the force of the heartbreaking feeling that it describes. In modern parlance we might say Jesus was gutted for them, heartbroken. He cared and he cared very deeply. Why did he care? Because they were "like sheep without a shepherd". There is a huge amount of OT background behind the words but basically the phrase points to people who are in great danger without the resources to escape from it.

What was it that Jesus saw in these people? He saw their spiritual need. He saw their longing for truth and a real knowledge of God. He saw that they needed a shepherd, a rescuer.

He saw their true spiritual state and it hurt.

We see something of the same compassion when Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. Here were people in such great spiritual need that it wrenched at his guts, it broke his heart.

Two things are coming out here. The first is that Jesus care was not just for his circle of friends. It was much wider than that. The second is that his care was linked to spiritual realities. He was torn apart at seeing people who were like lost sheep.

Both these things are a challenge to us as a church if we are to be people focussed as Jesus was. The challenge is not just to be concerned about ourselves. We are not to be always looking inwards. There is a huge world out there with many thousands of people and many of them are "like sheep without a shepherd." I wonder do we care and do we see the need of others as urgent?

James Hudson Taylor the great missionary to China tells how a young Chinese man having been converted and having worked with Hudson Taylor for some months eventually came to him with a painful question, "how long have you had the glad tidings in England" he asked unsuspectingly. Hudson Taylor was ashamed to tell him and replied that it was several hundred years. "What," exclaimed the man in astonishment, "several hundred years? Is it possible that you have known about Jesus for so long and only now come to tell us? My father sought for the truth for more than twenty years and died without finding it. Oh why did you not come sooner?"

I think the problem for us is that if a person is hungry, homeless, in rags we can see it and it can move us. But the person who is lost to God, well we can't see that. Also because we are still very earthly people what tends to matter to us is that people have enough for life now rather than the opportunity of life eternal.

Friends I think we should pray earnestly that we begin to see people with the eyes of Jesus, to see their real need for only then will we truly care for a world that is lost and for which Jesus gave his life. Only then will we recognise that it mattered that much to God and only then will we have that sense of urgency to meet the spiritual needs of a lost world.

Jesus care was for his friends but also for all people.

3. Jesus' concern for the whole person

Let's go back to v34, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things."

What do you make of that? I mean when I have compassion on people I make my sermons shorter not longer!

But here is the point isn't it? Their need was spiritual – they needed to know God and his love for them and so God taught them about himself. Again his care was shown in sharing of himself.

However, we also see his concern was for the whole person and so we get this great miracle which is recorded for us in vs 35-44 and through which he met a very real physical need

Jesus fed these people spiritually and physically. He was concerned for the whole person and again that is a reminder to us that our care for people needs to be focussed on the whole person. It is not sufficient just to offer the word of God if there are physical needs as well but it is certainly never sufficient just to care for people's physical need and ignore their spiritual need.

4. A sharing community

A fourth thing we see here is that these early Christians in following the lead of Jesus were a sharing group. We see Jesus of course leading the way here. We have already commented upon how he shared himself with the disciples and with the large crowd. We see how he shared the word of God with them. Then we see how he shared their resources taking those five loaves and two fish and sharing them not just with his close circle of friends but with everyone.

In a people focussed community, which the church following Jesus lead should be, we will share what resources we have. We will share ourselves giving time to others. We will share the word of God, with those who are disciples and those who are not and we will share our resources again within the circle of disciples and outside it with others.

Is this a mark of our church that we are people focussed and show it in sharing?

Earlier in the year when we were looking at our Stewardship of possessions I mentioned the fact that in line with the early church who held all things in common one church I knew drew up a list of things people had and were ready to share, bikes and garden implements, cars and so on.

If we are people focussed as a church and as Jesus was then we will be a sharing community. I wonder what that means for me and what it means

for you?

5. A united people

Finally I have a feeling that this event had the effect of drawing the disciples together, of uniting them and certainly as a church we should be a people united.

How were those disciples united?

a. In Jesus. Jesus not unnaturally is at the centre of this account in Mark's gospel as Mark helps his readers to see Jesus firstly as the Messiah and then as the Messiah who came to suffer and die. But here in v30 the disciples gathered round Jesus. He was the centre the uniting factor and the more they identified with him the closer they got to each other.

Then when Jesus blessed the bread and fish and gave it to them they were united in serving Jesus and in serving others as they served him.

The church following Jesus should be people focussed as he was but it will become increasingly united as we grow into him and serve him because our unity is found in him.

b the disciples also found a unity because they had a common story. This account is in Mark and we think Peter was behind the writing of Mark's gospel. It is in John's gospel written by John and in Matthew. Can you see what I am saying? The event had an impact on the disciples who were there and involved in it and they told others of what Jesus had done. They had a common story and their message was, "hear what the Lord has done for me." Again as a church we find our unity in our common story of what Jesus has done for us. It is always good to share our story, the story of how we came to faith of what God has done for me in the summer for as we share our story we find our unity a common bond in Jesus but also as we share our story we care for others because it is through our story that God graciously acts to point others to Jesus and draw them to him.

I think today as we think together about our nature as a church that we take some time to share our story as I shared at the beginning something of my story through the story told by Doug Barnett. So why not afterwards share something of your story with someone else or ask someone else about their story but please be caring and why not ask or tell someone who you don't know so well?

Our strap line as a church is to follow Jesus in every way. Here we see him as caring and sharing and creating a united group of followers. May Jesus be the centre of our church, the heart beat of our lives together creating in us a church that is people focussed and is caring, sharing and united.