

## Practice Compassion

**"Thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Genesis 24:67).**

In his book *Re-imagining Britain: Foundations for Hope* (2018) Archbishop of Canterbury has this to say about hope,

Hope does not depend on experience. Our history demonstrates that it can be inspired by a vision – a new narrative of the future – that opens possibilities, rather than closes them down; that makes an individual or a group, or even a nation, producers in their own drama and not merely actors repeating the lines set by others or by some mysterious fate. Hope gives us purpose – it is life-giving (p.26).

That which is said of hope can easily be said of compassion which is part of our theme for today. If we replace hope with compassion the note by the Archbishop would read:

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Looked at in relation to hope, especially in light of the last phrase – “compassion is life giving” – we get a sense of the invitation to ‘practice compassion,’ which is our theme for today.

The word practice means the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it or the customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing of something. Compassion means sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. A practice is to put something into action and compassion is doing something for the benefit of another. To practice compassion therefore is to do something for the benefit of an individual or community. This action for the benefit of others is the sense we get from the interaction between Abraham's household and the household of Rebekah. Recorded in the first reading from Genesis 24, the story of the choice of Rebekah as a wife for Isaac is a story of love and hope expressed in compassion.

In Hebrew the name Rebekah means either captivating or knotted cord. One commentator, reflecting on the dimension of knotted cord says "Within this name [Rebekah] lies the notion that individuals are placed together by something higher or smarter than they."<sup>1</sup> The sense we get is that Isaac and Rebekah's love for each other is mediated. It is a gift. Abraham's servants made the choice of a wife easy for Isaac. Yet, as soon as Isaac saw Rebekah he immediately fell in love

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Rebekah.html#.XwCpdmhKjIU>

with her. This brings out the captivating aspect of her name. Rebekah was so beautiful she lived up to the character of her name, that is, she was captivating. She captivated both the imagination of Abraham's servants and Isaac her husband.

Re-imagining Britain in hope, according to the Archbishop of Canterbury, is similar to re-imagining Jamaica through the practice of compassion. As we saw earlier, compassion is living or doing things for the good of others. Here we can learn from the Archbishop of Canterbury who frames hope in the context of a narrative which needs to drive the thoughts and actions of the British people. He concludes his book on a narrative note of hope in these words "The UK grew from Christian roots: my hope is that in the future it discovers the power of the narrative that has shaped it for so long and set its values so deeply" (p.287). That which is said of the UK and hope relates to Jamaica and the practice of compassion.

Practices of compassion are implied in the text quoted earlier from Genesis 24. The writer says **Isaac was comforted after his mother's death"** (Genesis 24:67). Where the writer of the book of Genesis speaks of comfort we can easily insert compassion. Isaac's mother Sarah died and his Father Abraham had compassion

for his son. In the midst of his grief Abraham reached out to the other, his son Isaac, and sought to comfort him. A son Isaac in the midst of grief was inconsolable. With no mother to comfort him, Abraham reached out to other members of his family in order to demonstrate what it means to practice compassion.

Sympathy, charity and commiseration are words which can be used to translate the Greek word for compassion in the New Testament. Time and again, in fact 21 times the writers of the four gospels repeat this phrase “Jesus had compassion on them.” Jesus is the real presence of God in flesh and in him we get a glimpse into the nature of God. Bishop Michael Curry, in a sermon at Trinity Church, Wall Street in New York in 2016, chose as his theme, “as you prepare to march, meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus.” This phrase is from a letter written by Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr from a jail in Birmingham Alabama (1963). Bishop Curry reminded the congregation that the love of Jesus has the power to transform lives. We speak today of this love as the practice of compassion. Jesus speaks to this compassion in the Gospel reading in these words, “Come to me you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28-30). Jesus has a heart of compassion and so should we.

In the sermon on Jesus and Racial Justice Bishop Curry tells a true story told by the mystic and Quaker practitioner Howard Thurman. I have given the story the theme “From chicken droppings to chicken soup and roses.”<sup>2</sup>

Howard Thurman’s grandmother practiced compassion. She reached out to the other who was sick, suffering and in need. This practice is reinforced in the Collect we prayed earlier, “devoted to you [God] with our whole heart and united to one another with pure affection.” Practice compassion means devotion to God and care for each other. By her life and practice Howard Thurman learnt from his grandmother the meaning of practicing compassion. We too can engage in practices of compassion and make the world a more hopeful, loving and compassionate place. Let us with the Archbishop of Canterbury re-imagine a world where love reigns. To do this we can learn from Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr, “as you prepare to march, meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus.” As we leave here today let us meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus. This is the meaning of practicing compassion. It is living for God and living for others so the world will be a better place. In the name...

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Michael+curry+Jesus+and+racial+justice+](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Michael+curry+Jesus+and+racial+justice+)