



The topic for today is Invitation to Empathy. So, what is Empathy?

A typical definition is **the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation.**ⁱ As a counsellor, empathy is of utmost importance. There are many different theoretical approaches to counselling and when choosing which course I wanted to do, I chose Person Centred Counselling because I believe Jesus embodied this approach long before Carl Rogers or any other psychologist even started thinking about counselling. The gospels are peppered with examples of Jesus' compassion and empathic responses.

For example in John 11 we see that although Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead and we read that, '[When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled](#)' (Jn.11:33 NIV) and we see that Jesus wept.

Likewise,

- Matthew 9:36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (NIV)
- Matthew 20:34 Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him. (NIV)
- Mark 8:2 'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. (NIV)

And many more.

We constantly see Jesus meeting people where they were at and treating everyone with respect and gentleness, unlike the religious leaders who were putting the heavy burden of laws into people and condemning them when they didn't live up to what they taught, even though the Pharisees didn't keep the laws themselves.



So, when we look at Jesus, first and foremost, we see in Him a God who cares. Who understands and knows our feelings.

In Hebrews 4:15 we are reminded that “We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses.” (NIV)

Jesus’ presence on earth gives us evidence that shows that God knows everything and cares for us.

But although we might know this intellectually, do we really believe it and understand it with our hearts? Or do we sometimes feel let down by God?

Have you ever found yourself thinking “But God doesn’t really understand ...” or “He doesn’t really care about me” or even “God has abandoned me”?

God can sometimes feel very far from us. We may pour out prayers to Him and it can feel like no one is listening. It can feel as if God doesn’t understand and isn’t fulfilling His promises to us. There seems to be a gap between what we know to be true, and how we experience things in reality.

This can make it difficult to trust, to pray, to worship, to serve, to hope and to care. As Christians, this may be something we are unwilling to admit to which may lead us to feeling cut off not only from God but our fellow Christians as we try to hide the struggles we’re having. But it’s a common struggle and by admitting it we are opening the doors to receiving the help we need. When we are in a dark and desolate place, we may not even know what or how to pray so we need Jesus and our church family to carry us through.

That theme is seen in the famous poem ‘footprints in the sand’, originally by Mary Stevenson,

But I have noticed that during
the most trying periods of my life
there have only been one
set of footprints in the sand.



Why, when I needed you most,
you have not been there for me?"

The Lord replied,
"The times when you have
seen only one set of footprints,
is when I carried you."ii

Jesus does care. He knows far more about us than we know of ourselves. He understands what pain and rejection feels like far better than we do.

- Jesus intimately knows and cares about our experiences. He understands the pain we feel.
- The incarnation – Jesus' coming to earth – is the action that most shows the empathy that God has for us, but Jesus continued to live a life showing empathy and compassion on those who most needed to know God's love.

If you are feeling like God doesn't understand or that He cannot truly know what you are feeling, please here this.

- God knows you intimately. He knows everything you are going through, and He goes through it with you.
- He is there with you in every single moment.
- God doesn't just look from a distance; He is with you in the joys and the sorrows.

This is the first important thing I want you to take away from today.

Scene 2 – What if we knew in advance?

Sometimes we can look back and realise that we got through the difficulties and even sometimes we can see good come out of it and think, if only I knew how it would work out that would have been so much easier. We might sometimes think, if only I knew what the future held then I could cope better with life.

But what if you knew that you were going to have a brutal, slow, painful death?



Jesus did know His future. He knew from the beginning of time that he would have to die on the cross. How do you think that made him feel?

Jesus knew what was ahead of Him on the cross. He understood God's will for His life, and He knew the extent of the need around Him in the world. He understood the Old Testament theme of sacrifice and was familiar with the prophecies giving the details of the cross. He knew from the beginning of time that it was always part of the plan that He would carry the sins of the world. This was something He predicted numerous times in His own teaching, along with the resurrection.

For example, Jesus speaks plainly about His death:

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” (Mark 8:31 NIV)

This is not a one-off occasion – three times He repeats this prediction. Yet despite knowing the pain He would go through, He still chose to journey towards the cross because He loves us so very much.

After all the physical pain, the emotionally scarring jeering, the failure of the disciples to stay with Him, there was still worse to come. In a cry of utter desolation as He said, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Mk. 15:33b NIV)

Psalm 22

Jesus is quoting Psalm 22, which was read for us earlier, which sees King David facing serious troubles. David's cry of desperation is framed by incredible levels of detail, which almost perfectly describe the experience of crucifixion that Jesus was going to face.

For example, David records in verses 7 and 8 a description of the mockery and insults, which includes the taunt whether God will intervene and rescue him.



This seems to mirror exactly what happened to Jesus as the crowds, the Jewish authorities, the Roman soldiers and even the criminal dying next to Him mocked Him for being unable to save Himself.

David also records his own physical experience in verses 14 and 15 which acts as an uncanny description of crucifixion as bones and joints are pulled out of place, the heart is put under immense pressure, and there is a desperate sensation of thirst as the victim experiences asphyxiation as death approaches.

Finally, if you continue reading Psalm 22, David records the shame and humiliation of his experience in verses 16–18, which include the piercing of hands and feet, the contortion of the naked body to show the bones, the crowds staring and gloating, and bargaining over the victim's clothes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Again, these descriptions match the physical experience of crucifixion where nails were driven through Jesus' hands and feet, and the crowds jeered as He died, thirsty, naked and broken. David has described Jesus' crucifixion with uncanny accuracy. Jesus' cry depicts the physical and emotional agony He suffered for our sake.

But Jesus' use of the introduction to Psalm 22 also expresses a much deeper, more agonising and more heartfelt despair at the isolation that He, God the Son, was experiencing at being alienated from God the Father.

Somehow, in some profound and mysterious way, the triune God was disrupted by the cross. (No, I can't really grasp this either – it is too profound for my little brain) The consequence of Jesus carrying the crushing weight of the world's sins on His shoulders was that He and His Father were estranged.

- Jesus was forsaken by His Father so that we could be forgiven.
- He was rejected so that we could be accepted.
- He was estranged so that we could be adopted.
- He was excluded from the mercy of God so that we could be included.
- He was extradited (deported & sent back) so that we could be invited.



- Here is the ultimate act of hospitality – that Jesus would feel utterly abandoned by His Father, so that we could be rescued.^{iv}

Why? So that a way could be made for us to be connected with God.

Krish continues, (my emphasis in bold)

Jesus' words on the cross invite us to take a closer look at Psalm 22. This psalm not only gives us insight into what is happening at the scene – the crowds throwing their insults, the pouring out of water, the death that follows the thirst – but also into how Jesus is feeling – abandoned, desperate, alone.

The emotions at the heart of His distress prove many things.

They prove His **humanity** – He experiences pain in the same way we do.

They prove His **love** – He went to such desperate extremes to rescue us.

They prove His **unique relationship with the Father** – from whom He has never been separated before.

These words from the cross invite us to empathise with Jesus in His pain.

But in a far more profound way, it is Jesus who shows empathy to us in our pain and distress. Because of Jesus' empathy towards us, we are invited to experience forgiveness, which we accept with deep gratitude and worship.

Because of Jesus' empathy towards us, we are invited to follow His example, empathising with others in times of physical, emotional and spiritual distress.^v

Jesus' empathy is a model for us in how we interact with other people.

Even though He was suffering and dying on the cross, He showed compassion to those around Him:

He made sure His mother was both cared and provided for by asking one of His disciples to look after her as if she were his mother.

He showed compassion and mercy to the thief hanging on the cross next to Him.

Even in those moments of intense distress, He loved others. We are called to follow Jesus' example. To show love to those around us – not just our

An Invitation to Empathy (Sue's edited sermon notes)

friends or fellow Christian brothers and sisters, but to love even those who hate us.

Paul encourages us to show compassion and kindness as we seek to follow Christ,

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12 NIV)

As we continue to follow Christ, think about your relationships, how can you embody Christ's attitude of empathy and compassion towards others?

We finish with Krish's **Final Thoughts**

Jesus is the great go-between. He enters our world and draws alongside us. He understands us, and He identifies with our suffering.

When we are troubled, Jesus invites us to the cross where He reminds us that He too was troubled, and that because of His suffering we can be saved.

When others are troubled, Jesus invites us to follow in His footsteps and empathise with those in need even though it may cost us dearly.

Throughout the ages Christians have moved into difficult neighbourhoods, or have crossed continents, or have opened up their homes to live and work among the poor and needy.

So, what does Jesus' willingness to suffer on our behalf inspire and invite you/me to do?^{vi}

ⁱ Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy>>

ⁱⁱ Mary Stevenson, 'Footprints in the Sand' <<https://footprints-in-the-sand.com/index.php?page=Poem/Poem.php>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Krish Kandiah, *Living Faith: Invitations from the Cross* (Farnham: CWR, 2017), p.49.

^{iv} Kandiah, p.49.

^v Kandiah, p.50.

^{vi} Kandiah, p.52.