A close-up photograph of a hand pouring water into a pool of water. The hand is dark-skinned and is positioned at the top of the frame, with water streaming from the fingers. The water in the pool below is rippling and reflecting light. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with a horizon line.

PUBLIC ISSUES COMMISSION

*God of
Compassion*
A LENTEN JOURNEY

EDITED BY KATY NICHOLLS

ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF CANBERRA AND GOULBURN

God of Compassion: A Lenten Journey

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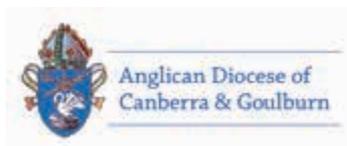
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Contents

Foreword	v
Introduction	1
How to use this book	2
Week 1: What does compassion look like?	3
Week 2: See the unseen: refugees and asylum seekers	9
Ways that we can practice the compassion called for by God	13
Week 3: Listen with compassion to those in aged care	15
Week 4: Make space for those pushed aside: First Australians and the Anglican Church	21
Week 5: Speak out against injustice: increasing inequality	27
Week 6: Keep trying as we face challenges	33
Go deeper	39

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Foreword

*Bishop Mark Short
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The compassion of God calls us beyond observation to engagement.

There is so much about our way of life that pushes us towards being passive consumers of images. On our screens and through our phones we can access up-to-date stories and statistics about the suffering in our world. Yet even as information abounds our reserves of wisdom and compassion to respond to those challenges seem to run low.

In the Bible we encounter a God who sees and acts. God sees the people of Israel groaning under the burden of slavery and comes down to deliver them and bring them into a land of promise. God sees humanity weighed down by the burden of sin and comes down in person to deliver us through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

One of the hallmarks of Jesus' earthly ministry is his compassion. When he sees people wandering like sheep without a shepherd, when he sees people burdened by sickness, evil and exclusion he responds by teaching, healing and restoring.

Christians believe that through the Holy Spirit God's compassionate love is poured into our hearts. That love is awakened as we encounter a needy world with our minds transformed by God's life-giving word.

I am delighted to commend these studies prepared by members of the Public Issues Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. Whether individually or in groups, whether during the season of Lent or at other times my prayer is that our eyes and hearts will be opened to the opportunities around us to engage our world with the love and truth of Jesus. None of us can do everything but together we can do far more than we could dream or imagine.

In the Risen Jesus,
+*Mark*

Introduction

*Jeremy Halcrow,
CEO, Anglicare (NSW South, West & ACT)*

*A*n Indigenous elder once said “You are welcome to walk on this land, just consider where you place your foot and how you place it because others will follow.”

Jesus walked this earth as God become human. These Lenten Bible studies give us the opportunity to reflect on the path Jesus walked; a path of radical love towards the cross which then opened heaven’s door for us to follow.

There is no doubt that a distinctive character of Jesus Christ was the compassion that he had for the people he met, particularly those who were suffering. This is why ‘compassion’ is a core value for Anglicare. Jesus’ teaching and example of great compassion towards the vulnerable resonates deeply in the life of our Anglicare services. We seek to walk with the vulnerable in ways that bring hope and healing; to bring life in its fullest.

And yet it’s important to remember that true compassion means ‘walking alongside in suffering’. The etymology of compassion is co-suffering. Being sensitive and feeling things deeply is not compassion. Rather compassion is ‘feeling as another’; the deep motivating power of empathy. What drives true compassion is a deep sense of justice.

The prophet Micah pondered what God requires from us. His thought experiment ran through the most extraordinary list of ways people might think they could please God, including giving up their most prized possessions and loved ones. And yet what God really requires from us sounds far more simple and reasonable:

“to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”.

Yet on a deeper level what God is requiring from us here is actually very challenging. What does ‘acting justly’ mean in the context of our lives?

Perhaps it may help to see how compassion and justice are intricately linked. Martin Luther King Jr said, “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

Compassion extends the hand of care to those who have fallen. Justice battles the systems that undermine our compassionate acts of relief.



Compassion drives us to pull people from flooded waters. But justice motivates us to go upstream and see if we can prevent the floods in the first place.

So true compassion will inform a vision of a more just society. It goes beyond just meeting a need; it seeks to encourage and empower those that are marginalised so they too can flourish, and reach their full human potential.

Micah is calling you:

“to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”.

It is my prayer that these Lenten studies will help guide you on this path.

How to use this book

This book is designed for small group study over a period of six weeks, but can also be used for private reflection. The studies are intended to last about 1-1.5 hours for a group. We encourage you to open and close each group session with prayer, finishing off by saying the provided closing prayer together. After each study there is an interlude section containing quotes, meditations or poems which you may choose to read and consider during the week.

We suggest you work through the studies in the group meeting, pausing where it suits to address issues that arise for your group.

Each study contains a scripture reading, or a small block of scripture verses, which you are encouraged to read together as a group. After reading, take a moment to record and share your response to the text. You may find it useful to read the scripture a second or third time before proceeding.

There are a set of discussion questions at the end of each study. They are intended as starting points and it is not expected that your group will address every question.

If you want to know more, or are moved to act, there are references and resources that support each week's theme in “Go deeper” on page 39. A range of practical ways of putting compassion into action are summarised on page 13.

Week 1: What does compassion look like?

Do you really
eat with pushers in our street cafés
and did I hear you ask that prostitute
'Love, I'm lost. Which way to Burton Street?
I think I've come too far?'

Noel Davis, *Emmaus*

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

Psalm 145:8–9 (NIV)

God loves you, and all God has made. That love is shown by the compassion demonstrated in the life and actions of Jesus. In this period of Lent, as we walk towards Jesus' death and resurrection, this study invites you to meditate on our God of compassion, what that means for how we act in the world, and for what God calls us to be.

Who are you? How do you define yourself? By your physical characteristics? Your intellectual or emotional features? What you do—your work or leisure or study? Where you come from or where you live? What you've experienced in life or what you dream of doing? Your family, or your family role? Other relationships? Your values? Your religious beliefs? Who you say you are probably varies depending on the setting as well as what is important to you.

We also define what group we belong to. You may have noticed that the group definition will change somewhat with context, e.g. one moment you are Australian, the next you are a proud Sydneysider talking to a Melburnian. The urge to identify with a group is so powerful that social psychologists have established that if you divide a random selection of strangers into two groups, the group members will favour 'my' group over 'them'. Just as striking—and just as human—is the social pressure we feel to conform to group norms and values, and the treatment of those who break those norms. The treatment of strike breakers and the shunning of people within religious groups are well-known examples, and you can find many examples of collective abuse in social media.



Mina Cikara, a psychologist, who says she was not particularly interested in baseball, accompanied her partner to a game. He was ceaselessly heckled by Yankees fans for wearing a Red Sox cap. “What I decided to do was take the hat from him, thinking I would be a lesser target by virtue of the fact that I was a woman,” Cikara says. “I was so wrong. I have never been called names like that in my entire life.” What surprised her was the strength of her reaction, to the point that her partner needed to physically restrain her from retaliating. She realised that her self-perception had changed so that she identified with the Red Sox Nation during the game—just because she wore the baseball hat and had suffered abuse about it. The experience has led her to a lifelong study of the psychology of group identification.

Over the ages our definition of who we as a society think we should care for—who is ‘us’—has changed and expanded. Ancient Greeks saw no contradiction in saying that a person “brought sorrow to no one among all men who dwell on earth” but praising the same person for slaying seven men in war. It seems those enemies and their families were not ‘men’. Slavery is now forbidden in Australia, and few would choose to go to a hanging or a bear-baiting for the spectacle; yet that was normal less than two centuries ago. Women, people from (or living in) other nations, First Australians, those unable to make a living, those with disabilities, people of any sexual orientation and gender are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect in Australia; a very different situation from the 1800s.

This expanding circle of care is driven by compassion. Compassion is derived from a Latin word meaning ‘to suffer with’, which implies you see the other, join in relationship with them, and recognise they are equal in dignity and worth, equally children of God and bearers of the image of God. Compassion bridges the gap between me and you and makes ‘us’. This is God’s task for us and one of the two great commandments—to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Compassion can get a bad name as soft, weak, misty-eyed tenderness, or kindness which may have an unconscious sense of superiority—giving from your wealth or strength to those who have less. For example, the wonderful outpouring of donations and kind actions to unknown people in a time of disaster is driven by feelings of concern. Yet no matter how laudable the care or how great the need, who wants to just be pitied or receive someone’s spare change? Where is the dignity in that? Compassion empowers.

Following in the steps of our God of compassion is more than responding to a feeling—it is a choice. In expressing compassion we open ourselves to others, even those whom we don't know or who are not human. Being compassionate in this way expands our circles of concern, moves us to change and to cooperate in community with others, and moves us to help if we can. But being compassionate does not mean helping from a position of power, but rather from placing yourself in a position beside the other, and behaving in a way that enables the other. It can be as simple as just listening to and accepting the other. Key elements of compassionate action explored in this study are to **notice** or **see** the unseen; to **listen** to the other's story, to who they are; to **make space** in our lives, our understandings, or our institutions for others so that they have an equal voice and breathing room to live with dignity; to **speak against injustice** and unjust systems; and to recognise that this may involve long term change that is not simple, so we need to **keep trying**, just as Jesus kept trying to his death.

Such compassion is risky. When you sit down with another person to try to understand what it is like to live their life, you risk being changed. You will enter into their pain and joy, and you may feel some of your own. You might feel anger at the way another has been treated, or grief over the losses or fears they share, or shame as you review your own actions or those of your group. Your horizons and world view will change. Your understanding of yourself may also change. Your understanding of others will increase, even if you still disagree with their actions or world view. You will be opened to love—God's greatest gift. How did Jesus, as God's human embodiment of compassion in the world, express it? Here he is in Jerusalem:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like white-washed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are



full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ...

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Matthew 23:23–30, 37

Did you just get whiplash? Jesus switches from “woe to you, hypocrites” to some of the most tender language in the Gospels, pleading with all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, including the scribes and Pharisees, to come to him to be loved and sheltered. Suddenly the ‘them’ becomes ‘us’.

Can we see Jesus’ compassion for the scribes and Pharisees threading through? We have no idea what tone Jesus uses, but look at what he says. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that no matter how well they obeyed the law to keep right before God, they have forgotten the intent of the law. He encourages them to examine themselves. He challenges their belief that they are better than earlier generations, they are special and would not have murdered the prophets. He warns them of the consequences of their actions.

Jesus holds up a mirror to the behaviour they are demonstrating, with the standard God asks, and the harm they are doing to themselves and others. Yet he tells them he not only still loves them, but they are his cherished children. Is this not what he does for all of us?

Maybe for the first time they saw themselves as he saw them. Jesus saw under their skin, and gave them an invitation to change what they were doing. Do you find it confronting to think that the Pharisees deserved Jesus’ love? Imagine how different the world might be if they had been willing to respond to his love and compassion, to see what they had in common with others not of their group, to change.

Imagine how different the world might be if you opened yourself to act with compassion.

Discussion questions

- What do you think drove the Pharisees' actions?
- Has anyone held up a mirror to you in love? What did it feel like?
- Have you ever been excluded or denigrated for not conforming? How did it feel?
- Have you ever suddenly seen another through different eyes, beginning to understand what life is like for them? What changed in your heart? What changed in your view of the world?
- Who is an 'other' you ignore, or scorn, or fear? What would it feel like if you tried to hear their story?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your deep love for us. As we start this journey of Lent with you, open our eyes to see others through the lens of your compassion. Slow us down, so that we might find time to hear another's story. Help us to expand our circle of care a little, to recognise those we find confronting as your beloved children. We ask this in your name. **Amen.**



Interlude

God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realise that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Love one another and you will be happy. It is as simple and difficult as that. There is no other way.

Leunig

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for God's justice, God's freedom, and God's peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation, or war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Sister Ruth Fox,
Sacred Heart Monastery, North Dakota

Polonius: My lord, I will use them according to their desert.

Hamlet: God's bodykins, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Week 2: See the unseen: refugees and asylum seekers

Are you really
spat upon by those of us who jeer and shout
and scrawl on walls 'Go home to Old Saigon, Bombay,
Nazareth...wherever you come from. There's not
room and food and jobs for all of us.
You've got to go.

Noel Davis, *Emmaus*

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges we face as human beings is to put ourselves in the shoes of someone with whom we are not at all familiar—a 'stranger', a 'foreigner', an 'alien'. Asylum seekers and refugees are, by definition, 'foreigners'. They are foreigners seeking refuge in a safe place away from the threat of religious, ethnic, social, or political persecution in their homeland. According to the United Nations, at the end of 2019 there were nearly 80 million forcibly displaced persons across the globe as a result of persecution, conflict or violence. This figure was more than double the number a decade earlier.

Despite the growing numbers of refugees around the world, to the average Australian living in the safety of a distant land protected by waters and political borders (and a punitive policy regime for those arriving by boat), asylum seekers and refugees are largely unseen. We cannot truly relate to their plight because they are largely invisible to us, and thus they are far too easily ignored as we go about our increasingly busy daily lives.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his



wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Luke 10:25–37

Jesus taught us that God cares deeply about *everyone*, that there is a special place in the heart of God for the vulnerable, the lost, the persecuted, and the displaced. Indeed, Jesus challenges us to the core in Matthew 25:31–46 when he makes it clear that we will be judged by our response to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned. In serving the 'least' of those amongst us we are, unbeknown to us, serving Jesus. To care compassionately for refugees and asylum seekers is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

The great irony is that Jesus was in fact a refugee in this world. Imagine what it must have been like for Jesus—the son of God—to come into this world of sin and suffering, only to be rejected in all of his goodness. As a baby he and his family went into exile as refugees in Egypt. In his adult life Jesus was constantly rejected by the Roman authorities, the Jewish Pharisees and many of those he came to give the good news of the kingdom of God. Despite the rejection and constant persecution he endured, Jesus remained true to his divine purpose and fulfilled God's promise to send a saviour for all. Even though Jesus was without sin or blame, he freely gave up his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

The parable of the good Samaritan gives us much food for thought about what it means to truly love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus himself could so easily have 'passed on the other side' and ignored the gaping wounds of our spiritual brokenness. Instead, he showed unimaginable compassion. He did not judge our worthiness. He did not avoid the cost, even though he knew he would eventually pay with his own life. He took action by restoring us so that we might restore others. In Jesus, compassion overflows.

From the moment I first met my new neighbour, Ruth*, what struck me was the warmth in her eyes and her infectious toothy smile. She had the sort of bright beaming face that made it impossible not to offer anything other than the same

in return. What I didn't know when I first met her was that Ruth and her family were refugees who had lived through more pain, suffering and persecution in the previous seven years than most Australians would ever even imagine for themselves, let alone encounter.

As our family got to know Ruth and her daughters, we quickly became very close friends. I vividly remember the day Ruth first shared her story with us. We were enjoying a backyard BBQ and the kids were all off playing and laughing. As we sat together watching the kids play and chatting, my wife asked Ruth why she had to flee her country. At that moment, Ruth paused, gently took her hand, and looked deeply into her eyes as if to say "I'm going to tell you deeply personal and traumatic things, but it is ok. I am ok. You will be ok." Ruth went on to explain the tragic details of their desperate escape from her homeland of South Sudan.

It was the mid-1990s, with religious and ethnic tensions escalating. It had got to the point that Ruth and her family were told to flee to the refugee camps over the border in Kenya. Tragically, Ruth lost her husband and five-year-old son in unthinkable traumatic circumstances as the family sought to flee. Ruth and her daughters then spent several years in refugee camps in Kenya waiting to be processed. It was there that she and her children learnt the basics of the English language. After several years in Kenya, Ruth's family was finally granted asylum in Australia. They settled in Wollongong and, whilst they were provided with what Ruth has gratefully described as "extremely generous" support from the government in so many areas, it was plain to see that they still felt a very real sense of social isolation and cultural disconnection.

As Ruth and her daughters became our close friends, we invited them along to our church. The church community embraced Ruth and her family, and they quickly felt at home. Ruth joined a women's group and the church's English language classes, which helped to expand her vocabulary and gave her confidence. My wife invited Ruth's daughters over several afternoons a week to read with her and our eldest daughter, which was a ritual that lasted four years, until the girls were both strong independent readers. Over the years, the church community provided significant financial and other support to Ruth and her family. Funds were raised for Ruth to travel back to Kenya on several occasions, in order to try to help get other family members out of war-torn South Sudan. The church also organised scholarships for both Ruth's daughters to attend the local Anglican Grammar School.



Today, nearly two decades on from arriving in Australia, Ruth is a strong advocate and leader within the Australian South Sudanese community, and helps to lead our church's 'Easy English' service for people of all nations. But if you ask Ruth what she is most grateful for, it is the future that Australia and her church helped forge for her daughters: one of whom is about to complete a Law/International Studies double degree at ANU, and another who is completing her HSC and about to study medicine at university, with the dream of becoming a doctor working for Médecins Sans Frontières.

I once asked Ruth why it is that she always has such a beaming smile on her face, no matter what the circumstances or tragedies she has endured in life. "Because God is good. He is so good", she said, her face once again beaming like the sun. Indeed God is. * *Alias used.*

Discussion questions

- Why do you think the helper, or 'good neighbour', in this parable is a Samaritan and the victim is a Jew?
- What do you think is the implication from the parable for how we think of and respond to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers?
- Has anyone in this group had an experience with refugees they can share?
- What could our group or congregation do to support the local refugee community?
- Who else is unseen? How might you begin to notice them?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, who walked this earth as an itinerant preacher in a land invaded and repressed by a foreign people, you knew persecution and cruelty first-hand. Bless, we pray, the refugees among us, and the many millions who have fled violence across the world. Stir us up to see, to hear, to speak and act on behalf of those who now have no place to call home, and to make truly welcome as our sisters and brothers those who are making a new home among us. In your name. **Amen.**

Ways that we can practice the compassion called for by God

- Pray: for example, for guidance on what God is calling for you to be. Pray for those in need of support, or those who are striving to express compassion in the world.
- Find the thing that stirs your heart and gives you energy and joy. To avoid burn-out try only one new or different thing each year.
- Get to know someone you don't know—see them, listen to their story. It could be someone you see regularly in your church, at work or the shops, or you could visit your local aged care home, hospital or prison.
- Work with others in your parish or community group to perceive gaps or needs, notice the unseen around you, and decide what you as a group can do.
- Join an organisation that is active in an area of care that moves you: for example Lifeline expresses compassion by listening, Companion House and Canberra Refugee Support work with refugees, Anglicare supports people face to face, and there are numerous groups nurturing the bush or supporting choices for a smaller carbon footprint.
- Inform yourself of the social, institutional and structural issues that are the source of harm you are concerned about, and advocate for change.
 - * On an individual level you can write, for example to your member of parliament, a government minister, or an organisation whose practices you would like to see improved.
 - * Attend group actions when it is safe, such as the Palm Sunday rallies.
 - * Build mutual support and community by joining or forming a group to inform others or campaign for change. For example, there is a faith-based working group of the Refugee Action Campaign.



Interlude

This strange country

Into this strange country
the godtree grew,
taking root in ground
we did not trust
finding nurture
in some other
earth
unrecognised by us.

And here,
among us
grew a life
that, by and by,
we recognised as living.
It discerned the
seasons in a
climate not our
own.

And, strangely,
it has shown us
shelter.

Its boughs
have made
our homes.

Pádraig Ó Tuama

Week 3: Listen with compassion to those in aged care

Are you really
with us when we're lonely, lost in endless replays
of our lives, looking for some company
in the letterbox, tapping on the road of darkness,
longing for the warmth of home and a mate
who hears our crying in the cloisters of our hearts?

Noel Davis, *Emmaus*

Compassion opens us up not merely to hear another's story, but to share it, and moves us to act in loving response. There is a growing challenge for the Church to offer compassion for the aged, who are becoming an increasingly large cohort in Australia. At the time of writing this study the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety had just released its Interim Report, revealing "A Shocking Tale of Neglect". The likelihood of a person living alone increases with age: 35% of people aged 85 years or more live alone. Some older people continue to live in their home and community, often relying on family and friends to assist them, but others will need care and support beyond that. When a person is assessed as having a condition of frailty or disability and requires continuing personal care, an Aged Care Assessment Team recommends the best care setting for them—in their home, a residential aged care facility or elsewhere. About 300,000 people entered residential aged care in 2017–18, the great majority on a permanent basis.

The Royal Commission observed that people do not usually enter residential aged care willingly. They often do so with great trepidation. They fear loss of autonomy, of individuality, of control over their own lives. They fear ceasing to be a person with distinct needs and preferences, with an emotional and intellectual life and freedom to do what they want, when they want to do it. Their families and friends often feel guilt, loss and fear: guilt at being unable to guarantee care at home any longer; loss of the person who, even if living with cognitive impairment, is still a unique personality; and fear of how this loved older person will be treated when there is no one there to look out for them. But for older people who are alone before entering residential aged care, the Commission observed that their trepidation is magnified because they know no one will visit them. They are completely reliant on the kindness of strangers.



A visitor's experience: An elderly friend needed to enter residential aged care at a time when her family were going overseas for a month. Visiting her in their absence only a few days later, it was apparent that she was in serious discomfort, and although she had requested help an hour previously, no-one had come. She was reluctant to be seen as a 'moaner' but the matter was urgent and her visitor insisted upon immediate attention. She had developed bed sores which were bad enough to result quickly in septicaemia. She was not being supported sympathetically by the general staff, and two days later, in great concern, her visitor spoke with a registered nurse on duty at the weekend, who recognised that she was in real danger. She was transferred to hospital, and the visitor supported her during very painful treatment. The visitor also had to find overseas contact information for her family from the internet because the residential care office could not locate it. Her son made urgent arrangements to return from overseas but had only one day with her before she died.

The need is great and growing. It is a foundational part of our mission in the church to offer loving care and kindness to others, which may focus on practical and social support, and also on responding to peoples' spiritual needs.

In relation to ageing, some scriptural texts address the respect and love which God expresses:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am he, even when you turn grey I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

Isaiah 46:3-4

Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.

Proverbs 16:31

And the love and respect to the aged and vulnerable that God expects of us:

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

Isaiah 1:17

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:8–13

These scripture texts point to the wonderful promise of God's love being renewed in us as we change through life, and into death. Loss of physical strength does not diminish the essence of a person. Even after we lose our memories, or power of speech, God is still with us, and there is opportunity for faith, hope and love. Compassion invites us to listen, get to know the story of elderly people in our community or lives, to plead for those who have lost the power to plead for themselves, and to travel with others towards the completion of their journey in life.

Where might you start as an individual or parish to explore and extend compassion to the frail and isolated aged people in your community? What might guide your own transition from health to reliance on others? The following are several publications from our own diocese focused on ageing which may help your journey. Further details are in the section "Go deeper" on page 39.

Examine your fears: *Living in the Next Phase* is a concise outline of theology, practice and ministries of later life. It explores why we might find it hard to think about later life, and discusses how we might live the initial years after retirement (when we are independent, healthy and able, the 'third age') and then beyond into the 'fourth age' when we need to accept more care from others. Its conclusions suggest churches may either exhibit more anxiety and avoidance of older people, or will discover more creative and interesting ministries to them.

Understand the need: *The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing* presents evidence that peoples' spiritual hunger, unlike church membership, is not in decline. In light of this, the author Professor MacKinlay suggests a broader practice of spiritual care is likely to be needed into the future, and her book identifies four main ways in which spiritual life is mediated in the lives of human beings, through:



- relationships/connectedness: really and deeply connecting with another human being;
- creativity/natural environment: the beauty of creation are reasons for joy and thankfulness;
- the arts: an emotional experience of awe is last to be affected in the progress of dementia; and
- religion: where symbols and rituals are important for those of religious faith, but also carry meaning for people who are not.

Find practical examples and encouragement: *When I'm Old—a guide to pastoral ministry with frail isolated older people* expresses the great delight that can come from spending time with frail isolated older people—“they treasure every minute you spend with them and they bring joy to the heart of any who have the privilege of spending time with them”. The book provides many stories, information on ageing, and advice and support for ministries across a range of issues including dementia, grieving, death and dying.

Co-author Archdeacon Anne Ranse says “For me it’s a ministry of friendship, trust and respect and once that is established then the pastoral is welcomed and direct and somehow God comes and visits his people.”

Seek training: If care for the isolated and frail in your community moves you or your parish, there is help and training to turn your desires to serve and journey with the aged into practical action (see “Go deeper” on page 39 for more information).

Actively living compassion—listening, sharing, loving, encouraging—is a real and growing need for those in aged care. It is an opportunity to enrich not only their lives and spirituality, but also our own.

Discussion questions

- Reflect on an older person in your life who has inspired or been an example to you. What does their life journey mean to you?
- Facing isolation and loss of relationships, how can intimacy with God and/or others be found?
- Facing despair and fear, how can hope be found?
- What makes it hard for us to think about later life?
- In what ways do the frail and aged who need greatest care minister to those who offer care?
- What might we do in our parish to foster creative ministries to older men and women?

Closing prayer

Loving God, who made us and carries us through life, we give you thanks for the chance to reflect on what it means to grow old. We recognise the paradox that is the wonderful accumulation of experience, the growth of infirmity and the progressive loss of long term friends. We weep for those who face their last months and years isolated and neglected. Help us to face our own fears about being lonely and vulnerable and to open ourselves to share others' journey as they travel ahead of us towards you. **Amen.**



Interlude

God bless this tiny little boat
And me who travels in it.
It stays afloat for years and years
And sinks within a minute.

And so the soul in which we sail,
Unknown by years of thinking,
Is deeply felt and understood
The minute that it's sinking.

Leunig

A reading from the book of exile chapter three

and he is inching towards glory
with only his own story on his back
he has patched up holes that opened
where his coverings have cracked
and some shoes were never meant for hiking so
he left them far behind
there are simple things he needs
on journeys such as these
food and love and drink and warmth and comfort
and a bag that's small enough
to carry all the failures and the idols
that he's picked up on the way

there are some days
he only moves
an inch or two

this is the pace of glory here in exile
Pádraig Ó Tuama

Week 4: Make space for those pushed aside: First Australians and the Anglican Church

Do you still tell
your dreamtime stories where warm and wondrous
hearts together ask, 'Tell us stories of our past,
where we came from, who gave us fire and rain
and what the wind was heard to sing:?'
Or do you cry alone in city caves these days?

Noel Davis, *Emmaus*

Rev'd Yimabalya* is an Anglican priest. She is full-time rector of the church in an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. She does not receive a salary. As a diocesan priest, however, the government, through Centrelink, has always accepted her unpaid work as fulfilling the requirements for unemployment benefits (prior to the coronavirus supplement in 2020 this was \$282.85 a week for a single person). The previous rector died some years ago. His work back then qualified him for the 'work for the dole' scheme. Before him, the rector was a missionary, a non-Aboriginal man, who received a modest salary, a house and a car.

Yimabalya's community is dysfunctional. Alcohol and drug addiction lead to increasing family violence. The small band of Christians, mostly faithful older women, face huge challenges. They are the ones who take most responsibility for the nurture of the children in their families. There are very few employment opportunities, particularly for young people, unless they leave their community. The main sources of income in the community are government welfare payments such as JobSeeker, Child Endowment and Disability Pensions. Many of the young men are in gaol in Darwin.

The little Christian group meets in the church on Sunday mornings. Yimabalya tries to have a mid-week prayer and Bible study meeting when she is able. Last year, however, there were 52 deaths in the community and Yimabalya had to take 52 funerals, an average of one per week. Family violence was one of the leading causes of death but other major causes were kidney disease, diabetes and infant mortality. Yimabalya is not young. She is widowed and no longer physically robust. Her time and her own spiritual and emotional resources are largely taken up by grief counselling, family reconciliation and funeral preparation. *Alias used.



Since 1788, the Aboriginal people of the continent now called Australia have suffered dispossession, displacement and violent death, their lands overrun without negotiation or compensation, their children taken, their sacred places desecrated. Some have finally had their connection and rights to ancestral lands recognised. But to live 'on country' in modern Australia requires support—health, education, and employment. The lack of opportunities in these communities inevitably leads to social dysfunction. Drug and alcohol addiction and family violence are common as are high infant mortality and general health problems. Emotional and psychological problems include disillusionment, depression, feelings of powerlessness and, among young people, sheer boredom.

Many Aboriginal people, however, have been displaced or live as a minority in urban communities which occupy their lands. Many of the young adults are only one generation removed from the 'stolen generations' and urban Aboriginal people still experience racism and discrimination. High profile Aboriginal media and sports personalities have recently shared their experiences of racism.

Anglican parishes in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory were once Anglican missions. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) withdrew in the 1960s and 70s in the era of community 'self-determination'. Since then clergy in these parishes have been Aboriginal people. They receive their ministry training at Nungalinga College, the combined churches training centre in Darwin.

The Diocese of the Northern Territory covers one fifth of Australia but has only 15 parishes, six of which are in Aboriginal communities. The diocese struggles financially—few of its parishes are financially viable. The diocese relies heavily on grants from supporting organisations such as Anglican Board of Mission (ABM), CMS and Bush Church Aid (BCA). A difficult issue is that most of these grants are only for a year, which makes continuity and future planning difficult. A significant proportion of the Bishop's time is taken up with raising support.

In these Aboriginal communities, the work of the parish priests is conducted without a stipend and counted as voluntary work by Centrelink, which has in the past qualified them for unemployment benefit. There are many other expenses to support these clergy which the diocese tries to provide. Attending in-service training and synod costs thousands of dollars per person in airfares from remote communities, as do pastoral visits by the Bishop and others.

How might we as a church be called to consider the difference in support for people employed directly by BCA, ABM or CMS compared with these Aboriginal priests?

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Colossians 3:11

The Galatians verse is very familiar to us: it speaks of the equality, through Christ, of all the children of God. In God's family, distinctions based on gender, class or race have no place.

It is easy for us to say that "no longer Jew or Greek" means no distinction according to race, but that was not exactly what Paul meant at the time. In Paul's time, Jew meant Jew but Greek meant all the other peoples of the Roman Empire, all of whom spoke Greek. Paul was dealing with whether people must become Jews before they could become Christian. This was a very contentious point in the new Christian communities containing both Jews and Greek speakers. Paul points out that both Jews and Greeks are equally children of the Old Testament promises and therefore equal in the sight of God.

By the time Colossians was written, the gospel had started to move beyond the borders of the Empire, beyond what the Greeks considered to be the civilised world. Outside lay what the Greeks called 'barbarians', people whom they thought could not even speak properly, who uttered nonsense like 'bar-bar-bar'. But the notion of racial equality in the sight of God is extended in Colossians to *all humankind*. This was radical teaching indeed. ALL people are equal in the sight of God, including the people whom the Greeks considered sub-human. To emphasise the point, the writer adds to the 'barbarians' the Scythians, the nomadic tribespeople of the Eurasian steppes, now Ukraine and Georgia, who were then the feared embodiment of ignorance and savagery.

The context of this verse is the renewing of our beings into the image of the Creator. Striving for the image of God, we must embrace all humankind, including those we might despise or fear. It has taken the world, even the Christian



world, a long time to understand this. The Black Lives Matter movement has starkly raised the issue of inequality of treatment in the world and the way in which that inequality is based on race. It can be seen with the simplest statistics on the massively disproportionate incarceration rate of Aboriginal people, over ten times the non-Indigenous rate per capita in June 2020. This leads to a disproportionate number of deaths in custody. Part of the justifiable anger about these Aboriginal deaths in custody is that many of those deaths were of people on remand or jailed for very minor offences.

The question before us is the extent to which we ourselves are not yet fully renewed to be like the mind of the Creator. Is there racial inequality in the church, intentional or unintentional? Does the church always act as if all people, all humankind, are equal? Can we as a church leave people such as Rev'd Yimabalya to minister alone and unsupported? Closer to home, how can we as a church invite Aboriginal voices to tell us how they find our systems and structures excluding? For example, would it surprise you to know that an Aboriginal ministry in our diocese has foundered for lack of funding? (see "Go deeper" section on page 39).

Paul's inclusive message as expressed in Galatians and Colossians led to an explosive growth from a Jewish sect to a church that spanned the Roman Empire, learning and changing from the insights of the converts. What renewal of the Australian church might God bring through listening to the experiences, wisdom and insights of our Aboriginal sisters and brothers?

Discussion questions

- Is there racial inequality in the church around the world? Does the church embody the equality of all people to a watching world?
- If Aboriginal clergy do not complain, and even say they are not unhappy with their conditions, does this justify maintaining what the world might see as discrimination? How can all voices be heard in resolving this?
- Reconciliation also includes the provision of opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. How might your parish support Aboriginal ministries in Australia?
- Are these NT Aboriginal parishes the exclusive responsibility of their diocese, or should their support be the responsibility of the national Church?

If you agree that we have a responsibility to the Anglican Church in the NT, would you consider drafting guidance, or even a motion, to provide to your representatives on the Australian General Synod?

- How can we as an institution make space for a wider range of people to be included and share their views, including First Australians?

Closing Prayer

God of all people of the earth, we confess our failure to love your people around the world as you love them. We pray especially for our Christian Aboriginal sisters and brothers struggling to witness for you and to live Christian lives in very difficult circumstances. Grant them your grace and courage. Convict the wider church of an understanding of their struggles and a willingness to seek means to support them. Help us to open our ears to learn from them, and our institutional arrangements to give them breathing space. We ask this in the name of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us all. **Amen.**



Interlude

Gratefully we learn from you,
The advanced race,
You with long centuries of lore behind you,
We who were Australians long before,
You who came yesterday ...
Much that we loved is gone ...
But not the deep indigenous things,
The past is still so much a part of us,
Still about us, still within us ...
We would like to see our own customs kept ...
Not assimilation but integration,
Not submergence but our uplifting.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *The Dawn is at Hand*

... racism is evil because God the creator is a communion of love since all eternity, and wants to include everyone, without remainder—whatever their skin colour or ethnic origin—at the table of mercy and hospitality shared forever by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Garry Worete Deverell, *Gondwana Theology*

I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Week 5: Speak out against injustice: increasing inequality

Have we really
classified you 'UNEMPLOYABLE'? These fits you take
are scary. Anything might happen. We can't be held
responsible. It's much too tough in business
at the moment. Another burden and the added worry
we can ill-afford to carry. Terribly sorry.
You understand.

Noel Davis, *Emmaus*

Australians value equality and fairness—even our most famous horse race is conducted with a handicap. We live in a wealthy country with an income safety net. Almost everyone has received government financial support at some stage, and we benefit from access to free schooling and health care. Most people move through several different income bands through their lives.

But the levels of inequality in our society have increased since at least the 1980s; and those systems set up to catch the vulnerable are showing holes. For example, some asylum seekers do not qualify for full unemployment support or Medicare, or do not even have the right to work. Those eligible for unemployment benefit prior to the Covid-19 supplement found that it was not enough to keep them. Those who are employed face increased uncertainty—with many more contracting out or paid hourly, and with recent underpayment scandals in a number of industries. Older women who rent accommodation can end up isolated because they can't even afford to bring food to a gathering.

It is estimated that four to six per cent of our society experience chronic or persistent disadvantage—that is one to 1.5 million people. Given that Australia has been such a prosperous nation over the last two decades, this is a significant number of people who have not shared the benefits.

Chief Executive,
Committee for Economic Development of Australia (2015).

The trends in increasing inequality in Australia include: measures of wealth disparity (the rich are richer and the poorest 20% are going backward); income—the proportion below the poverty line is increasing and wage disparities are growing; housing—with a rising proportion struggling with excessive costs; and unemployment benefit dropping as a proportion of average income.



Excessive inequality is bad for individuals and for the community. Poverty has impacts on people's health and education, their risk of dying early or being homeless. On the other hand high social status and wealth have been shown in multiple studies to be bad for social connectedness, empathy and generosity: all measures of a happier life.

Inequality adversely affects economic growth and stability. "[M]ore egalitarian societies tend to have lower steady-state unemployment. They also tend to have higher rates of technical progress and productivity growth." (J.K.Galbraith, *Inequality and Instability*). There are economic studies suggesting that inequality contributed to the global financial crisis.

Inequality is not just financial, it is also social: most visible in opportunities for education and employment. For example the unequal treatment of different races has led to higher and increasing incarceration rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Inequality has been a driving factor in the Black Lives Matter and other protest movements, and in the greater infection rate and number of deaths among minority groups during the coronavirus pandemic. What does our society say about those who are vulnerable—poor, unemployed, different, or having fled danger to seek safety here? The winding back of safety nets and the increase of disparity in wealth over decades speaks for itself:

- In addition to the drop in economic value, various changes to unemployment benefits since 1988 have focussed on tightening conditions and adding compliance requirements, including lower barriers for loss or suspension of the benefit. Many people previously on parenting or disability pensions are now on JobSeeker.
- For four years the Australian Government conducted an unlawful scheme which claimed inaccurate historical debts from many welfare recipients. The scheme used debt collectors and removed the claimed funds from tax returns, causing enormous emotional and financial stress—there have been claims people committed suicide. In 2020, following a court order, the Government announced it was refunding 470,000 debts claimed under the scheme valued at \$720 million.
- When businesses were closed and millions became unemployed or had their hours reduced in the coronavirus shutdown in March 2020, the Australian Government temporarily and significantly increased the payment to unemployed people, a tacit recognition that it is not sufficient.

The public discourse contributes to a general sense that those who are most vulnerable are to blame for their situation or have no right to ask for help.

Unemployed people are called dole bludgers, job snobs or leaners. Asylum seekers are often inaccurately called illegal, queue jumpers, or economic refugees, whereas in 2017, the vast majority of those confined in offshore detention who have been assessed were found to be *persecuted* refugees. Many have to turn to charities such as Anglicare.

“Finding money to pay the rent was difficult... and for the first time in my life, I wasn’t able to pay a bill,” says Brooke*. “I didn’t know what to do.” Having made the brave decision to leave a difficult relationship—with little more than the clothes on their backs—Brooke and her children faced the challenge of building a new life. As things became desperate, Brooke heard about the work of St John’s Care, a partner with Anglicare through St John’s Anglican Church in Canberra. “When I came into St John’s Care, the ladies sat me down, gave me a cup of tea, a food hamper... they made me feel really welcomed,” said Brooke. As well as food assistance, she received help with bills and support in navigating other community services. A few months later, Brooke needed some further help. The team were again on hand to encourage her and support her practically. “I feel more in control now,” says Brooke. “I don’t know what I would have done without the help from everyone at St John’s.” *Alias used.

By contrast, the settings advantaging the wealthy go almost un-noticed. Both the income and the wealth of the richest 20% of the population have grown since the 1980s—in 2017 they held nearly two thirds of all kinds of wealth. Globally Australia had the fifth highest number of people with ultra high wealth. Wealth enables the growth of further wealth much more easily than building wealth from scratch. Wealth passes on wealth—for example the children of the wealthy experience advantages such as schooling and support through tertiary education that are beyond the reach of others. Is this truly the fair go we aim for?

What does inequality look like in God’s kingdom? The bible has around 2,000 verses on the poor, wealth and poverty, and social justice. Jesus’ interpretation of God’s compassion and inclusion is scandalous, for our time and his:

Jesus said, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.



When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Matthew 20:1–16

"This isn't fair!" "You aren't being practical!" For those who have struggled and suffered in the hot sun, done everything that was asked of them, somehow the injustice that someone else would get paid the same amount for one hour's work is too much. This is natural: psychological studies have shown that equal reward for equal effort is prized even in other species.

Jesus asks us to struggle with this, no matter how hard we have worked to earn our bread, and to open our hearts to mirror God's generosity to all, even those we might fear and resent, or those we feel are competing for the limited resources necessary for life. Our God of compassion asks us to see the difference between the poor and the wealthy in our society, and to listen to the stories of those who are struggling. To speak out for a society that treats all justly, including the chance to have enough income to live with dignity, no matter what they do.

Discussion questions

- Who do you most identify with in this Gospel story? How do you think those last chosen felt all day in the marketplace, knowing their families would not eat that day? And when they were paid?
- Have you ever experienced unmerited generosity?
- For those who do not have a job, and may not have had one for several years, or never, do they still have value? How do we convey that value?
- What aspect of this week's study has struck you the most? What do you think we might do differently?

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus, you know what it was to be hungry and rejected. We grieve that as a society we are choosing to let people fall into persistent poverty and disadvantage. Give us the grace to recognise their needs and struggles, and the courage to counter the structural injustices we see around us. In your name. **Amen.**



Interlude

When you understand, you cannot help but love ... And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Try this exercise

Sit quietly and bring to mind someone—a friend or colleague, a stranger in the street or someone you might be having a challenging time with. For a few minutes, reflect on their similarity to you, using phrases like:

Just like me ... this person wants to be free from suffering and pain

Just like me ... this person wishes to be loved and to love freely

Just like me ... this person cries and is misunderstood

Just like me ... this person wants to be kind and caring

Just like me ... this person needs understanding and acceptance

Just like me ... this person has dreams

Just like me ... this person wants to belong

Just like me ... this person is a child of God

Just like me ... this person deserves to be treated as being of value.

Ask God to bring blessing into both your lives.

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

1 John 3:17–18

... I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Martin Luther King Jr, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*

Week 6: Keep trying as we face challenges

Do you really walk with us and listen to our stories?

Do you really cry out for our loving?

Do you really?

Noel Davis, *Emmaus*

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

Over the past few weeks we have looked at increasingly wider aspects of the question: who is my neighbour, for whom could I have compassion? Who have I not seen or heard? Maybe you have found your circle of concern or your horizons changed a little. But how often have you thought that these issues are beyond your power (in time, energy, authority) to do anything about? The source of the problem may be systemic issues in our society or institutions, not easily changed, and beyond the daily bounds of the things you already struggle with. Implicit within the call for compassion is the need for collaboration because the problems we face can be too big to be solved alone.

This last week is an invitation to ponder the implications of God's compassion for us in the things we strive and fail to do. In any human enterprise, human fallibility eventually diverts the best intentions. We try to control, and find that it backfires. For example, the laws and rules that the Pharisees enforced were a futile attempt to achieve something that is impossible—to be right with God in our own strength. Jesus was prepared to die to demonstrate that we are right with God, in God's grace, despite our failings. Reflect on the following from the point of view of the disciples:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray



that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ... Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him... Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Matthew 26:36–46, 50b, 56b

What did the disciples do? They slept. They fled. These were the closest followers of Jesus, who had walked with him for years, and who had just witnessed the momentous events of Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem, and the confusing events of the last supper. They stayed awake enough to hear and see the agony of Jesus’ struggle with fear and the desire for any other path. They were human: confused, exhausted, worried. Yet they could not even stay awake. At his arrest, one used violence, and they fled for their lives.

Do you think they felt they had let Jesus down? Betrayed all he had stood for, despite their experiences of his love and power? Yet in the midst of Jesus’ fear, he was still forgiving of their frailty. His interactions with them then and later, after he was resurrected, never included blame, only healing love. He empowered them without blame.

When we examine our own failings, can we allow God to offer that same forgiving love, that compassion? It is opening ourselves to that love that lets us be honest with ourselves, to be open to truth, to allow grief, and then find the path of hope to community and concern for others, as the disciples did.

One of the biggest failings we have as humanity is our failure to follow the calling to care for creation and live in joyful worship of God together with all the universe. Caring for creation can be an opportunity to work together to improve conditions for the vulnerable and to create caring communities:

In 1977 Wangari Maathai recognised that environmental degradation in Kenya was behind many of the country's problems. She started the Green Belt Movement which employed women to propagate and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, and provide food and firewood. They started with seven trees: over 51 million trees have been planted, and over 30,000 women have been trained. The Movement has developed community empowerment and advocacy.

She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her "contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace". In her Nobel Lecture, she said, "We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own—indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. This will happen if we see the need to revive our sense of belonging to a larger family of life, with which we have shared our evolutionary process. In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."

Wangari Maathai was motivated by the impact of environmental degradation on the people in her country and created a community to achieve it. We have a similar task before us in addressing the impacts of climate change and environmental destruction. Does that seem impossible or irrelevant? It is not surprising that we ignore the signs of increasing drought, fire, heatwave and coastal erosion. Climate change could have been designed to hit all our blind spots: the consequences of human actions may not become obvious for decades or centuries, they have widespread or distant impacts, they are cumulative—no one action makes a real difference, and they arise from our actions of good intent to make life better, more comfortable, safer, more connected. There is no one person who is responsible, terrible consequences are now inevitable and there is no easy way to change our course. The pain falls disproportionately on the poor, the children of the future, and the bright glory of the natural world. Like the disciples, I suspect mostly we find it hard to face this, and flee.

Byron Smith, a theologian and ethicist, likens the emotional responses to climate change to the responses to news of a cancer or the early stages of a pandemic. They are each something life-threatening, beyond our control, and grow invisibly until it is almost too late to do anything to ameliorate the impacts. It is natural to experience feelings such as fear, sorrow, guilt, helplessness, anger, betrayal, confusion, or horror. Our first, natural reaction to such bad news is denial. Then despair or desperation—surely we can find a quick and simple fix? We search for someone or something to blame, some reason why things



are this way, an external focus for our feelings. Or we distract ourselves—if I keep moving, keep busy, I won't have to feel this pain.

Do you feel shame that we respond this way? Jesus invites a new response. But first, we must learn to be compassionate with ourselves, and be willing to keep trying, encouraging each other when we stumble.

We *can* journey with Jesus from Gesthemane to the renewal of life at Easter. It involves sitting in the dark and pain of the cross, acknowledging our complicity in the ills of the world, listening to our shame, our fear and grief. Our pain will not break us, but it might break open our hearts to love. In that space, we open our hearts to the love of Jesus, who cooked fish for Peter on the shore and offered him healing. We are called to learn to apply that patient love to ourselves. God does not ask us to be perfect, only to be faithful. And like Peter, we can then be freed to follow Jesus' invitation—to find our role in “taking on the emotional load of caring for the plight of our neighbour”.

This is not a lonely path—the disciples were transformed from fearful individuals to a loving community that changed the world. You can find or create a community that suits your preferences, whether it is noticing who is vulnerable, hearing the stories of the affected, encouraging behavioural or structural change to make space for all of creation, or speaking out against injustice. Faced with despair, in God's compassion we find purpose, and hope. The disciples found joy. So shall we.

Discussion questions

- In his Encyclical *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*, Pope Francis encourages us to “approach nature and the environment [with] openness to awe and wonder, ... speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world”. What aspects of nature evoke awe and wonder in you?
- Spend a few moments contemplating your feelings about the future in a world of increasing climate change impacts. Can you share one or two of your reactions?
- How can you be more compassionate towards yourself?
- Can you recall a time when you worked with others to achieve something difficult and that was not possible alone?
- Is there something you feel inspired to do from this week? What do you think might be your first step? Who can you do it with?
- Does one of the topics in this six-week study touch you particularly? Perhaps there is another area of love for your neighbour that consumes you? What do you think might be stopping you from acting?

Closing prayer

Eternal and compassionate God, who loves all creation, and invites us to wonder and delight, help us to accept your love for us as part of the universe. You pour out your love on all—on those who have been marginalised, the hurt and forgotten, the proud and foolish, those who have and those who do not. Give us strength and faith to trust you, despite our fears and failings, and to follow you to a renewal of love and relationship with those whom the world has forgotten. **Amen.**



Closing meditations

It's the action, not the fruit of the action, that's important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there'll be any fruit. But that doesn't mean you stop doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.

Mahatma Gandhi

We give thanks for our friends.
Our dear friends.
We anger each other.
We fail each other.
We share this sad earth, this tender life,
 this precious time.
Such richness. Such wildness.
Together we are blown about.
Together we are dragged along.
All this delight.
All this suffering.
All this forgiving life.
We hold it together.
Amen

Leunig

Go deeper

Week 1: What does compassion look like?

Compassion in practice: Kim Bogucki, a policewoman's story—*Us versus them* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aevrVzYmeOA>).

More about Mina Cikara's work—*When I' becomes 'We'* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XfOYFpjH7o>).

Week 2: See the unseen: refugees and asylum seekers

Further information on world and Australian refugee numbers can be found at the following links:

UNHCR (<https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html>).

The Refugee Council of Australia has a wide range of information: (<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/statistics/>; <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/detention-australia-statistics/> and <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/category/getfacts/>).

Australian Government settlement (https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1617/RefugeeResettlement).

The Anglican Church in Southern Queensland has produced a *Study Guide on Asylum seekers and refugees: Scriptural theological and ethical approaches* (https://anglicancg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Asylum-Seekers-study-guide_A3-booklet-format-reduced.pdf).

Week 3: Listen with compassion to those in aged care

Sources referred to in this week include:

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Interim Report, October 2019. (<https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au>) The final report is due February 2021.



Andrew Cameron in collaboration with Rebecca Belzer and Caitlin Hurley (2014), *Living in the Next Phase—developing the theology, practice and ministries of later life*, Anglican Deaconess Ministries Ltd.

Elizabeth MacKinlay (2017), *The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing*, 2nd edition, Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Professor MacKinlay has also been leading a study on “Finding meaning in the lived experience of frailty” which will be accessible in the future.

Anne Ranse and Don Jamieson (2014), *When I’m Old—A Guide to Pastoral Ministry with Frail, Isolated Older People*, published with the support of Anglicare NSW South, NSW West and ACT. This publication also contains an extensive list of resources.

Volunteer training courses for spiritual care:

Spiritual Care—A Volunteer Training Course, featuring Professor John Swinton, 2017, Health Television Network, and also on-line at (<https://meaningfulageing.org.au/partners/pastoral-and-spiritual-care-series-2/>).

The Australian Government Department of Health manages a Community Visitors Scheme (<https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/community-visitors-scheme-cvs#>) which arranges volunteer visits to older people to provide friendship and companionship and lessen isolation. There is funding available, through grant rounds.

Week 4: Make space for those pushed aside: First Australians and the Anglican Church

A story from our own diocese: Consider the amazing work of the Rev’d Tom Slockee and his wife Muriel and their journey of establishing the Boomerang Meeting Place at Mogo; an Anglican place of worship and of spiritual and practical support. Established in 1998, Rev’d Slockee had been pastor there for over ten years, quietly supporting Aboriginal families in times of crisis, up and down the south coast throughout Walbunja Aboriginal communities.

Rev’d Slockee was the first Aboriginal man in the Goulburn Canberra Diocese to be ordained priest in 2000. His work was profound in his great ability to gather the community and to bring people together. Rev’d Tom was deputy Mayor of

the Eurobodalla Shire for several years and has always been a passionate advocate for his people. Despite significant need within the Aboriginal community, a lack of financial assistance meant that this ministry had to eventually cease.

Some relevant websites about the NT Anglican church:

Black Lives Matter a message from Bishop Chris Macleod (<https://www.natsiac.com/news.html>).

(<http://www.ntanglican.org.au/>)

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council can be found at (<https://www.natsiac.com/>) and (<https://www.natsiac.com/our-stories.html>).

The Anglican Board of Mission recently released a study on the Uluru Statement from the Heart: *A Voice in the Wilderness* (<https://www.abmission.org/resources.php/163/a-voice-in-the-wilderness>).

A couple of other Aboriginal voices on spirituality:

Jason Kelly (Barkanji man) discusses Aboriginal spirituality and the return to country of Mungo Man (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhq8V2KqAwo>).

Garry Worete Deverell (2018), *Gondwana Theology: A Trawlolway man reflects on Christian Faith*. Morning Star Publishing.

Week 5: Speak out against injustice: increasing inequality

The Australian Council on Social Service 2018 factsheet on inequality is an easy guide to trends in inequality in income and wealth (https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Inequality-in-Australia-2018_Factsheet.pdf).

A quick summary of the harm inequality does to the wealthy:

(https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_inequality_is_bad_for_the_one_percent)

Where did that figure of 2,000 bible verses on social justice come from?

(<https://www.cranbrooktownsman.com/opinion/the-hole-y-bible/>)



Week 6: Keep trying as we face challenges

Resources referred to in this week's study include:

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Lecture, Oslo, Norway (December 10, 2004). Transcript available at (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2004/maathai/26050-wangari-maathai-nobel-lecture-2004/>).

Byron Smith (2017), *Waking up to a warming world: Prospects for Christian Ethical Deliberation amidst Climate Fears*. PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh.

Pope Francis (2015), *Laudato Si': On care for our common home Encyclical Letter*. Available online at (https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf).

Learn to be compassionate with yourself. Paths of self compassion include meditation, journaling, creativity (play, art, music, dance), mindfulness and prayer. There are many resources available to support you in these. Local Christian meditation groups can be contacted via the Australian chapter of the World Community for Christian Meditation (<https://wccmaustralia.org.au/>). The Centre for Contemplation and Action also provides contemplative resources (<https://cac.org/about-cac/>).

A couple of climate change resources for Christians:

The Anglican Board of Mission recently released a study on climate change: *Climate for Change* (<https://www.abmission.org/resources.php?action=list-items&catId=33>).

Katharine Hayhoe is an evangelical Christian who has a YouTube channel on climate change: *Global Weirding*. A good starting example is *The Bible doesn't talk about climate change, right?* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpjL_otLq6Y).