

## Week 2: Loving

Title: **Love Comes Alongside**

Key Scripture: **The feeding of the 5,000 – Mark 6:31–44** (NKJV used, unless otherwise marked)

*Daily Guide* corresponding pages: **pp34–37**

Three points: **We all go through hard times. A paraclesis culture in our church. The heart of a paraclesis culture.**

**PowerPoint pointers are marked in this colour.**

### Introduction

Last week we began the **Paraclesis: Journeying Together** series. ‘Paraclesis’ comes from the Greek words:

**Para:** to be with, alongside

**Kaleo:** to call, to come

**Paraclesis** is coming alongside others. Last week, we were introduced to this through the story of the Good Samaritan. Today, we are going to explore the action of coming alongside others in more detail, using the story of the feeding of the 5,000 from Mark’s Gospel.

### **We all go through hard times**

The key verse for this series is:

***‘He comes alongside us [parakaleo] when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside [parakaleo] someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person [paraklesis] just as God was there for us [parakaleo]’***  
**(2 Cor. 1:4, *The Message*).**

Two things happen:

1. **God comes alongside us** and often He does so through the tangible presence of another human. Think back to those who have come alongside to support,

encourage and help you in tough times. Aren't you thankful for them? They were part of God's plan for your life.

2. Having brought someone alongside us in hard times, **God brings us alongside someone else**. In other words, we then become His tangible presence in someone else's life.

My (Trevor J. Partridge's) definition of paraclesis is: **'Just show up and be there for someone who is struggling.'**

Last week we asked the question 'Who Cares?' and we thought about establishing a core value of care. However, in order for the whole church to grow together, this core value needs to be translated into a core culture. So today we'll be exploring what a paraclesis culture of 'coming alongside others' might look like for us as a church.

## **A paraclesis culture in our church**

Someone once said that going to church can be a bit like riding in a bus. Everyone faces one direction, looking at the back of people's heads. Some look out the window, wondering if they'll come to their destination. There's one person up front, doing all the driving and collecting money. You can't wait for your stop so you can get off!

Cynical maybe, but is there a seed of truth here? What is the purpose of coming to church? To hear a sermon? Sing? Give tithes and offerings? Socialise? They're all a part of it but every Sunday is an opportunity to meet with God and meaningfully come alongside others.

The Church is called to be a paraclesis community.

**Hebrews 10:25** says: *'let us not give up meeting together. Some are in the habit of doing this. Instead, let us encourage [parakaleo] one another with words of hope. Let us do this even more as you see Christ's return approaching'* (NIRV).

Sometimes, we can get so focused on vision and projects that we neglect people. Some had withdrawn, walked away, rejected and forsaken the church in this reading. The writer exhorts those who remain not to let more walk away – not to allow the church to suffer from 'front door, back door' syndrome (for more on this, see Tuesday, Week 2 in the *Daily Guide*).

The writer is saying, 'Don't stop gathering together, as is the habit of some, but continue to come together, not just to hold services but to come alongside to encourage, support and help [*parakaleo*] one another.' The Greek word here for 'habit' is '**ethos**' and means custom or culture. The writer is encouraging them to set and maintain a new kind of culture – a paraclesis culture.

**CULTURE: Creating an environment in which we intentionally and regularly come alongside others, with support and help.**

Culture doesn't happen by chance; it is created. So **how can we begin to grow this culture of care within our church?**

**Create the opportunity to establish culture [Fill in *Daily Guide*]**

***'When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it. But we should give special attention to those who are in the family of believers'* (Gal. 6:10, NCV).**

Every church and family creates its culture by design or default. Culture, in the agricultural sense, means the kind of nutrients and soil that enable something to grow and flourish. For instance, a rose doesn't grow well in sand; it needs a culture of loam and nutrients in which to grow, to enable its fragrance, colour and beauty to emerge. Thinking back to the bus analogy for church, this kind of established culture does not create opportunities for us to flourish in coming alongside others. Small groups, inviting people into our homes, midweek church groups ... these can create opportunities for us to establish a culture of care. In the *Daily Guide*, there are some 'Tips for Journeying Together' for you to learn and practise. Why not intentionally approach someone after the service and invite them for Sunday lunch? Could you pick someone up for church, shopping or the school run? Could you carpool with work colleagues, or offer to take some work on for someone? (Etc.)

**Consider how we can come alongside [Fill in *Daily Guide*]**

***'We must also consider how to encourage [*parakaleo*] each another to show love and to do good things'* (Heb. 10:24, GW).**

Once we have created opportunities, we need to be intentional about using them. Even before coming to church or going to a small group, let's think about our intentions. Are we intending to sit in the same seat, talk only to the same people – in a 'get in and get out' kind of way? Or could we sit somewhere else, talk to someone new and open up and share meaningfully with another person? We all face weekly struggles. At the end of the service or meeting, why not turn to the person next to you and ask how their week has been? If appropriate, you could pray with each other.

Continue to come alongside [Fill in Daily Guide]

**'we must continue [the habit] to encourage [parakaleo] each other' (Heb. 10:25, GW).**

Once we've made these new connections with people, let's continue to build on them. We can add these people to our prayer list, our messaging list or even our bake a cake list so that, during the week, the culture we share continues. Rather than only reaching out to people now and again, let's regularly encourage, affirm, value and support each other.

Following these three things will help us become a community where 'love comes alongside'. By coming alongside others, we can **'Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2, ESV)**. God is in the business of coming alongside and He has called us to this business of coming alongside others (as our key verse for the series, **2 Cor. 1:4**, says).

There is an Aesop's fable called **'The Wind and the Sun'**. It goes something like this:

The sun and the wind were arguing about who was strongest, when they saw a travelling man. They decided that the one who could make him take off his cloak was, most certainly, the strongest. So the sun hid behind a cloud while the wind blew upon the man. But the more harshly he blew, the more closely the man pulled his cloak around himself. When the wind gave up, the sun came out. He came alongside the man with his warmth, heat and light. As he shone, the man took off his cloak and in the warm glow, he walked freely and openly.

This is a brilliant picture of what it means to come alongside others with love. In the warmth of acceptance, affirmation and encouragement, they can feel the love of God. This should be at the heart of our culture.

**Coming alongside means:**

- **Recognising that people do not have problems but needs** [Fill in Daily Guide]  
Love doesn't see problems; it recognises needs and reaches out to them. It is people focused, rather than problem focused. We all have deep needs. For many years, psychologists have studied and identified that within every human is a need, or longing, for a sense of acceptance, value and belonging. People thrive in a culture that provides for these needs. God's plan is that, through Christ, we become part of His family: a family in which 'love comes alongside'.

- **Knowing how to receive and give love [Fill in *Daily Guide*]**

Neurologist and psychiatrist, Dr Karl Stern, discovered two fundamental human needs and he believed that, if these two needs are met, many psychological problems and emotional disturbances could be resolved. These two needs are: the need to receive love and the need to give love. When we receive love, we receive acceptance, affirmation and value, and then we find purpose in loving as we have been loved. Isn't that what **2 Corinthians 1:4** says?

What happens when we worship? As we express our love for God, there is that reciprocal receiving of God's love upon us. Why do we take bread and wine? To celebrate sacrifice, yes, but also to celebrate and receive the love of God in Jesus.

- **Loving as we have been loved by God [Fill in *Daily Guide*]**

God's love comes first: **'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19, NIV)**. God does not love us because of what we do but simply because He's chosen to set His love upon us. If we went to sleep for a year and did absolutely nothing, God would love us just the same when we woke up. We may worry about not loving God enough but we have it backwards – we won't know how to love God or others until we understand how much He loves us! And when we know how much He loves us, our love responds to Him and flows to others He brings us alongside.

**John 13:34** says **'Let me give you a new command, love one another in the same way I have loved you' (NIV)**. The more we realise how much God loves us, the easier it is to love people, especially when they aren't being very lovable. To love as we have been loved is to value others as we are valued, to accept others as we have been accepted, to affirm others as we have been affirmed, to forgive others as we have been forgiven.

- **An expression of authentic community [Fill in *Daily Guide*]**

After commanding the disciples to love one another, Jesus said, **'This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other' (John 13:35, *The Message*)**. This 'discipleship test' is not based on our vision or how many noble projects, seminars, conferences, festivals or activities we're involved in. Our love for each other is the litmus paper test. Jesus was saying, 'Don't look at what they're doing or saying; look at the culture, look at who they are when they're together to see if they are genuine and authentic.'

Love should be at the centre of our culture. People coming into our church need to see 'love coming alongside'. Many who walk away from church feel they do not

belong or are not accepted for who they are. There is a difference between attending and belonging. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not only about salvation from sin, but about meeting the deep longings and needs of the human heart. Through the cross, we are brought into God's family. These needs can only be fully met through Christ in the context of Christian community.

**Hebrews 6:11** says, *'we are anxious that you keep right on loving others as long as life lasts'* (TLB).

## The heart of a paracletic culture

Let's now have a look at today's story, which is found in **Mark 6:31–44** [**you might like to read it out, here**].

This story is significant. It is the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels. And it shows us how the disciples had an opportunity to come alongside others to care but, on this occasion, they got it wrong!

It had been a busy day. Jesus was journeying with His disciples across Galilee. They were together 'doing church' with Jesus on the hillside, when suddenly they were gate-crashed by a large crowd. Their cosy little church club was disturbed and hijacked before it started.

Such had been the impact of Jesus' ministry that the crowd that followed Him around the lake was 5,000 men, besides women and children (so you could guess that it might have been at least 15,000!). Wouldn't you be pleased if that many people showed up for church on Sunday morning? But these disciples were not. They hadn't yet learned the culture of care. **The disciples suffered from ...**

### **Compassion deficit disorder [Fill in *Daily Guide*]**

Compassion feels something and does something. *'If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear'* (1 John 3:17, *The Message*).

But the disciples felt nothing, and so did nothing. They asked Jesus to **'Send them away'** (v36).

In contrast to this lack of compassion, Jesus had ...

## A caring and compassionate ethos

Just look at Jesus' response to the crowd: ***'Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd'*** (Mark 6:34).

When Jesus saw the crowd, He didn't see hungry or problem people, but 'sheep without a shepherd'. He saw that they felt they has no sense of belonging ... little self-value or worth ... were cut loose ... wandering aimlessly with no purpose.

So what does He do?

- **He accepts them [Fill in *Daily Guide*]** – as they are. Acceptance is at the core of belonging. Love says you belong as you are, with all your needs. A caring culture provides a safe, accepting, non-rejecting atmosphere.
- **He validates them [Fill in *Daily Guide*]** – The disciples rejected this crowd; they disapproved of them being there. Jesus acted in a way that told the crowd they were worth His time and care. Valuing people is one the most compassionate things we can do.
- **He reaches out to them [Fill in *Daily Guide*]** – The disciples were dismissive, seeing them as too much of a burden, but Jesus invited them in, needs and all.

### COMPASSION: Moved inwardly to get involved, care and come alongside.

The word 'compassion' has roots in Greek, originating from pain of the kidneys or bowels. It is a vivid word, meaning to be gripped in the pit of your stomach: as we say, 'that gut feeling'. If a friend's loved one is sick, you genuinely show pity and sympathy. But when your own loved one is sick, you'd willingly change places with them if you could. You're desperate to be alongside, to ease their pain and discomfort.

Compassion moves us inwardly. **2 Corinthians 5:14** says, ***'Christ's love has moved me to such extremes. His love has the first and last word in everything we do'*** (*The Message*).

Whenever you read about Jesus journeying in the Gospels, you will see that He was **moved** with compassion. He came alongside and engaged with people – and miracles happened. Whether it was the widow of Nain whose son was raised to life, the blind men in Jericho, a

leper in Galilee or Lazarus at Bethany, on these occasions the Bible does not say that He *had* compassion but that He was *moved* with compassion.

Compassion brought about the miracle provision of the loaves and fishes. Compassion is the watermark of the miraculous: where compassion is, miracles happen.

Now, Jesus doesn't let these disciples off the hook. He requires their involvement. He wants them to come alongside. **Mark 6:34–44** shows us that compassion:

- **Moves towards others** – Compassion engages with needs. Jesus tells His disciples to take care of the people – feed them. In **1 John 3:17–18**, Jesus says, *'If we have all we need and see one of our own people in need, we must have pity on that person, or else we cannot say we love God. Children, you show love for others by truly helping them, and not merely by talking about it'* (CEV).
- **Accepts responsibility for others** – Jesus refuses to send these needy people away. When we see a need, we can choose to 'pass the buck' or accept responsibility. And responsibility requires involvement.
- **Gives no excuses** – The disciples had excuses and we might have had them too if we were in their situation! Physically they had inadequate resources – so little to feed so many. But Jesus says 'I am the resource'.
- **Places what we have in Jesus' hands** – Jesus asks the disciples to tell Him what they had. Often, we are quick to talk about what we don't have, about what we can't do, but Jesus asks us: 'What do you have? Give it to me.'
- **Draws on Christ's resources** – The disciples bring the food to Jesus. See what happens: common bread in the miracle hands of Jesus becomes miracle bread. Now miracle bread is placed back in common hands, so they can come alongside the needy multitude. *'He comes alongside us when we go through hard times'* and deposits things in our lives and in our hands, then He *'brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us'*.
- **Reaches out to the point of felt need** – *'they all ate and were filled'* (Mark 6:42). You may not realise this but Jesus never feeds the 5,000. He comes alongside the disciples and places bread and fish back in their hands. They then sit the people



down in groups and come alongside them and feed them. That is what compassion does. That is what a paracletic culture is and does.

- **Demonstrates love coming alongside** – In the Gospels, there are six accounts of the disciples feeding a multitude (Feeding 5,000: Matthew 14:13–21, Mark 6:30–44, Luke 9:10–17, John 6:1–13. Feeding 4,000: Matthew 15:32–39, Mark 8:1–9). This shows us just how significant this was. In all instances, Jesus blessed what they brought and it was multiplied. In **Matthew 15:32–39**, the disciples feed 4,000 but this time the food is not provided by a boy but is their own supply that they had brought along. Now they were prepared to come alongside others in love.

Whatever your experience, whatever you've got, give it to God and let Him take it in His miracle hands and drop His compassion into your heart. We long to see the miracle hand of God at work. Together, let's create a culture in which that can happen, the culture of 'love that comes alongside'.

Let's build the **paracletic ethos** into the heart of the **culture of care** within our church community.

***'He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us' (2 Cor. 1:4, The Message).***

**For further reading, see chapters 3 and 4 of *Love with Skin On*, Trevor J. Partridge (Farnham: CWR, 2016).**

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