



Christians for an Ethical Society talk: Tom Henderson-Brooks, *Gutsy compassion*

By Katy Nicholls

Jesus felt compassion as a churning in his bowels (*splagchnizomai*), for the crowds “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9: 36). This quote became the light on a journey for Christians for an Ethical Society on 18 May at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, as the Venerable Tom Henderson-Brooks explored compassion as the core of God – innate, foundational, and axiomatic – and what that means for us.

In a talk structured around Jesus’ compassion, his own journey, and what God calls us to be today, Tom entranced us with images and insights into human fallibility and the support of the Holy Spirit. He reminded us that in the verse following the quote on Jesus’ compassion for the harassed and helpless, Jesus calls for laborers for the harvest – those with the character of compassion.

What does the character of compassion look like?

Tom took us on a comprehensive survey of the pain in a ‘Passion week’ typical for part of his life in Kings Cross – asking us to have compassion on all from perpetrators of violence, busy office workers, homesick backpackers, to those most abandoned by society and themselves, homeless, seeking comfort and a living in drugs and sex work, or abandoned, despairing and dead. Jesus’ love encompasses all. We are called to witness to this love.

But being a compassionate disciple calls for guts in risking the reputational slurs Jesus received – as an alcoholic, friend of sex workers, subversive ... Tom’s stories of meeting addicts and sex workers where they were, and offering them acceptance, love, and the space to try again made this clear. Compassion will take you to places you can’t imagine, and even quiet actions can upset powerful and angry forces, resulting in risks greater than those to reputation, such as your safety, or your family’s.

Gutsy compassion acts. And it will disrupt your comfortable lifestyle – we were reminded of Mordechai Vanunu, sentenced to 18 years solitary confinement by the Israeli government for revealing the existence of its (till then) secret nuclear weapons program. It was Mordechai’s becoming a Christian in Darlinghurst that gave him the courage to release the photos and information he had taken, and face the risk of his imprisonment: “I have heard the voice of my conscience and I have nowhere to hide”.

Finally, Tom reminded us that Jesus touched and healed lepers. Sometimes the church has failed the lepers of its day – whether with covid, or with AIDS in its early days. Sometimes the church has disavowed those who act with compassion. Many of those with AIDS saw God in the response of the church, and lost their faith. Our compassion can fail: but God’s never does.

Tom closed with challenging us all – where is God calling us to act– what gutsy compassion is needed now today? God will bring to light what is hidden in darkness – we are called to seek the people who are lost, helpless and harassed, like sheep without a shepherd.

The audience followed his speech with a wide range of questions, seeking his views on compassion in a range of settings. The evening closed with thanks from the CES President, Ingrid Moses, and a hopeful message from the new Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Anthony Maher.

Christians for an Ethical Society (ces.org.au) is a Canberra-based ecumenical forum which seeks to engage with the ethical challenges of the contemporary world, locally, nationally and internationally.