

# Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu

**A man is a man because of people**

ANTHONY BARKER

*At a special service of dedication held in St. Mary's Cathedral to mark the first day of the National Week of Compassion, Dr. Anthony Barker was the preacher. Dr. Barker is the doctor in charge of the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital at Nqutu, Zululand. This is the text of his address:*

**Q**UITE SUDDENLY there is an urgency in our thinking about the needs of our fellow men. We find it increasingly intolerable to bear that there are so many poor among us, so many whose lives, if not actually threatened, are grey, dull and diminished.

We react to all this in two ways; with fervour to the relief of the problem, or by withdrawal from the dirt, the inelegance, the unseemliness of it all. We have heard so often now, of hunger and poverty that we feel like crying "enough" when anyone tells us anything more about them. We are satiated with pictures of hungry kids that look just like all the other hungry kids we've seen so many times that we have become oblivious. And just what are we supposed to do about them, anyway?

Then, as we catch ourselves retreating thus, we recall that Jesus received the children, and rebuked his disciples as they tried to take the strain off their master by sending them away. We remember how he taught that the prison-visitor, going to the most disreputable villain in the local gaol, or the one who gave bread to the hungry, and the one who clothed the naked, were in fact, rendering the identical service to Him. Just occasionally we see this. Just occasionally, though usually a moment too late, recognise that it is Christ who looks at us through the eyes of the hopeless ones, the misfits, the thoroughly undeserving.

We are lucky if we do see the human dilemma in these terms. Society as a whole does not, and some of the blame for this must be laid at our door who have not commended Jesus to society, nor introduced Him into our lives sufficiently to make people ask about Him. Society has, generally, gagged at the love of Jesus, and found little difficulty in swallowing huge gobbets of the occult and the esoteric.

Yet even to those who would least claim Christ as their Lord, there is a recognition that this compassionate man has much to say to our time; that he represents the goodness that bit by bit, seems to be leaking away from our civilisation. You do not have to be a Christian to be alarmed by the fall from grace that is everywhere about you. We are worried sick about our children, wistfully, anxiously hoping they may not be corrupted by aimlessness or damaged by drugs. We are troubled by the brashness of a culture built upon selfishness. We want our goodness back.

We want our goodness back more than we know in our anxious hearts, and who can give it again to us than He who taught us not to be anxious (that was his word) for food, for clothing, for the correct address. We want our goodness back, who showed us the path better than he who walked right into a shameful death because he so much wanted life for his brothers? We want our goodness back. We may receive it best from the one who knew that it only increases when it is freely spent.

So, whether we believe, or whether we do not believe, we are here trying to find out what to do with a week of compassion, now that we have got one.

It is reasonable to learn again from Jesus. He gave us direction. He gave us ideas as to what sort of people we were to try to become to fit into his kingdom. Hear him, then, as he says we should resemble the man from Samaria who came across the body of a robbed traveller, there on the rocky road that winds down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Now, this kind of compassionate action towards the sick has, we may truthfully say, been the concern of the Christian body for a long time. In Europe, in Africa and all over the world, Christians have been pioneers in the care of the sick. It has indeed become a kind of good habit which we are inclined to continue without, perhaps, very deep thought as to whether we have outlived our usefulness in this field, just as it is very certain that we have outgrown our financial strength. In the mission hospital in Zululand where I've been working these past years, as in so many places

of its kind all over the country Christ's work of compassion has been going on. Here have been his hands at work in the back yard of our country among the forgotten people in the tribal areas, among the new people there, moved to comply with a master-plan of human dwelling sites, which looks a great deal better on a planners drawing board than it does in the courts of heaven. Here disciplined and expert work has gone on over the years to the greatly increased safety and happiness of thousands. Here babies are secure and mothers able to look forward to their return home with joy. Here the blind see, the lame walk, which, after all, are the signs of the kingdom's imminence. These hospitals have relied on your help in the past, and even now, as the central government, Bantu Affairs and State Health, take a closer, possibly more straitening interest in the affairs of the hospitals there is still room for help, the help of time and talents, the help of handwork, the help of money to achieve the objects which we should wish to achieve ourselves but which do not necessarily qualify for help from government. Compassion is expressed in these ways.

#### Chain reaction of wonder

He said we were to be like the wee boy who had a couple of fish and a few barley loaves who, through his agency, started a chain reaction of wonder that fed a whole crowd. Certainly food, and its lack, is dominant in the thinking of our rural areas. I wish we could wake up to the fact that the reserves are, agriculturally speaking, bankrupt. There are many reasons for this, some of them discreditable to the African smallholder, some to African public opinion, which may look askance at the progressive farmer, some which stem from that most ancient of sore spots, land hunger. Our people are short of land. They are short of land because they have increased in numbers, in part from the 'fault' of the doctors, in part from the official tendency to sweep surplus population in the urban areas under the national carpet where, if they can survive, they are totally inconspicuous and no longer an offence in the official nostrils. With the shortage of land and the poor farming methods that everywhere obtain, malnutrition burgeons in the land. I know it is unpopular to speak of this today; I know that a great deal is being planned and not a little is being done to relieve this, but I hold it unworthy of a nation like ours, with pretensions to cultural leadership in this continent, to have quite so much

built-in hunger in the system as at present exists. Our thinking towards compassionate acts will include the feeding of the hungry, the support of all the moves, government or private towards the betterment of agriculture. We shall ourselves use the land rightly, and encourage others to do so; we shall support research and agricultural improvement plans, we shall abhor waste and be disgusted by pollution; we shall resist exploitation of the natural resources of this marvellously endowed land of ours.

#### For compassion's sake

He told the soldiers to be content with their wages; He told the story of a wage dispute over those hired in the vineyard as late as the eleventh hour; He described men and women as those who worked, who fished, tilled the land, collected the taxes. For every man this is a right; to work, to earn, to produce. Here is boredom banished, prosperity enough achieved. Yet we know only too well that there is no work in the reserves for most. We realise that in the rural townships, Mondlo, Limehill, Morsgat, that the situation is more critical still, for there is no agricultural shock absorber here to take up the bumps of unemployment. We know, for it is declared and official that it is so, that these men and women must become migrant labourers to survive at all in what is, after all, a monetary economy. We can guess, without the exercise of much imagination just how dull, how tedious, how lacking in hope and in love will be the life of the migrant labourer. We can well see that his wife — or his lover — is in worse shape still for she has the added fear that he upon whom she and her children depend, may never return; may become one of the masses absorbed into the city, nameless and without a face. We shall welcome the hope of the border industry, and be glad when economic necessity compels a softening of the rigours of this harsh policy. We shall recognise that many are worried by this, both public and private figures, Christian and Non-Christian; then for compassion's sake let us be honest enough to face the need for change here. The industrialist and the employer of labour can act on the acknowledged principle that fair wages make good workers, that those content at desk and bench are the best producers, the safest workers. Right action at this time and right thinking to back it could go far to break the fearful deadlock which is the place where we are headed right now. We can

exert compassion here too. And where better than in this great city of yours?

He told his disciples not to turn kids away, and spoke more sharply than anywhere else in his recorded speech about those who troubled the children — for of such is the kingdom of heaven. If you have seen, as I have seen day after day, the children dancing, running, moving at a most unsnail-like pace, willingly to school, you will have no doubt of the desire of these little ones to learn, to enter the new world which is as rich in discovery for them as it is for the children of the most privileged in the land. What a sad tale it comes to be, though, as these first, gay steps give way to the yearly dwindling stream headed for the higher forms. We know that the fall-out rate after standard 2 will be 50% and that less than 1% of these lovely kids will get their matric. So many more will stagnate in jobs that do not stretch them at all; so very many more will drift from casual employment to casual employment, the interest value of each job being infinitesimal to nil, the stimulus to good work always lacking. There are so many reasons for this, infirmity of purpose, economic stringency — we all know the business about African children having to provide their own books — parental inadequacy, lack of hope in the future, or of any vision of how all this book learning may be put into practice at all. We may entertain doubts of the educability of so many, and these may be reasonable doubts as well as the promptings of prejudice, at the back of our mind we wonder if the retardations we see may not be based on childhood malnutrition? Educationalists are worried, just as all right-minded people are worried, by the two-classes-a-day system, by inadequately trained teachers, by the divorce of white education from black education, when these two must surely be considered together as we plan a national strategy on illiteracy? There is room here for compassion, surely? A true 'feeling with' the aspirations of the kids and of the parents who care about the kids. If we are in education, are we caring enough? Do we grumble often enough, send letters often enough to the papers under erudite pseudonyms, 'Minerva', 'Scriptorius' etc. expressing our unease about the inequalities of education within our land? It is an odd and paradoxical business after all that the scantiest education facilities are available to those who most need education to survive.

There is a science long neglected among us ordinary people who live outside the lab-

oratores and classrooms of the land, whose name is Ecology. It is the science of the earth, the word about how all life is interdependent on all other life, and all life is conditioned by its environment. No man lives to himself, says Saint Paul, or, more picturesquely, as the Zulus put it; *umuntu ungununtu ngabantu*: a man is a man because of people. We have rather forgotten this. We have forgotten it in our social life together, preferring to emphasise our differences rather than recount our similarities. We have forgotten it in our life together in Christ. Here, sectional interest and denominational difference have deeply divided that which, he prayed, might be one. We have woken up — I hope not too late — to some of these dangers. But we have not yet sensed the full force of the vision of interdependence of man and nature which we are being taught, forcibly. We are being taught the unity of man and his environment by a series of hard lessons which more or less shock us. We know, because a lot of fish died shamefully in Durban harbour; we know because a pall of smoke hangs over our cities we know, because dongas snake harshly over too many of our fields. Indestructible plastic worries us, and derelict motor cars, and rivers drying up, and flamingoes retreating from the pans along the coast. And do we not most see this disharmony over the deepest problem of all, the problem of our relationships between men and men? I see it so.

And even so, Compassion week calls us to a new insight which, if we but grasp the very



hem will make us more sensitive than we were, more ready to help and to heal. We are to know that this country, this world, this universe is indeed in the hand of God. It is further apparent that if we fail to apprehend the laws that govern all life, we may pay a price for our narrowness which includes our destruction. It is increasingly apparent that a man is fully, totally and completely interdependent upon all others, and that failure to realise this and act upon it will destroy all hope of peace within the wall and outside.

### Sacred cows

We do not underestimate the difficulties. Even if we overcome our diffidence, our shyness over even *trying* to show compassion, we find ourselves up against the redoubtable dragons of Official Attitudes, National-ways-of-life, the sacred cows of commerce. Whatever can we do, faced with these foes? I believe we can act — as I have already said we must act — within the daily path of our life. If those paths are exalted, then we may indeed pass through the searing vapours of the largest and most formidable dragons. But for most of us it will be George Herbert all over again:

Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,  
Makes that and the action fine.

Thus it seems that we are called upon to act intelligently and compassionately within the normal framework of our lives. I have tried, through a quarter of a century, to express just this within the framework of an agriculturally bankrupt reserve, by being the best doctor I know how to be, and by teaching young women how to be good nurses, too. This has so clearly been to the benefit and support of the whole people that I am filled with wonder at being used, in a cynical age, half so effectively. But you're a professional do-gooder, you say; It's easy for you! I do indeed count it a piece of good fortune to have been able to be the doctor to a whole district, but I'm sure it does not have to be thus, balanced on the edge of eccentricity, that we can show compassion. Rather it is the lot of every Christian, of every true and intelligent man and woman, to show these qualities; it may be in our wages policy up at the factory; it may be in our needlework — sewing garments for cold, needy bodies; it may be in our professional skills; or in our prayers; or in our giving; or in our willingness to be humiliated along with those whose lot it is to be humiliated.

Here and now, and through all the days of our lives, we can show compassion. Here and now, put our compassion into effective action.

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## A House Divided

JOEL CARLSON

*Mr. Carlson is a well-known Johannesburg attorney. This article is taken from the fifth Edgar Brookes Academic Freedom lecture which he delivered at Natal University at Pietermaritzburg.*

**A**CADEMIC FREEDOM is the right to seek knowledge and to pursue the truth for its own sake. It is the right to critically examine truth, and to consider what ends society should pursue to achieve the common good. It must involve the right of free association with all persons, of free expression without restriction of any kind. It must involve the right to join with others in an effort to persuade the people and the government to accept the truth and act in accordance with it.

Our society is an unfree society. We have never known true academic freedom.

We have known the illusion of academic freedom and this has served to bolster the status quo and to isolate us from the truth of unfreedom and injustice.

The cause of those who are unfree, of those who suffer discrimination and injustice, is the cause of academic freedom too.

You have greatly honoured me by inviting me to deliver the 1970 Edgar Brookes lecture.

I intend to tell you about the injustice of our society. I believe that while this injustice exists neither you, nor I, nor any of us, will ever be free.

I have taken as criteria of a free and just society the Articles of the Declaration of Human Rights signed on December 19th, 1948, by member states of the United Nations Assembly without a dissenting vote. (South Africa, the Soviet bloc and Saudi Arabia abstained from voting).