

Empathy is at the heart of Christian love

By: Gail Charalambous

We are living in uncertain and unsettling times and the world seems to be imploding. Every day individuals, communities and countries are at the receiving end of unspeakable acts of violence, destruction, cruelty and harm.

Little children and their parents are dying and our planet is being harmed by wanton greed and war.

In America, some fundamental Christian churches are declaring that empathy is a sin. This, instead of addressing issues of cruelty and human rights abuses, committed by their government.

(Definition as per the Oxford Dictionary - empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.)

Declaring empathy a sin is shocking!

Brothers and Sisters, we have to confront and dispel this untruth.

Being empathetic or showing empathy is not sinful. Rather we, the church community, need to embark on a journey of deep introspection and the question we must ponder and ask ourselves is this:

Do we understand the concept of empathy, are we empathetic and do we practise empathy?

G M Gilbert an American psychologist who interviewed and wrote about high ranking Nazi leaders during the Nuremberg trials had this to say, "I told you once that I was searching for the nature of evil, I think I've come close to defining it as a lack of empathy.

"It is the one characteristic that connects all the defendants; (of this trial), a genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow man."

It is not only American Christians who have downgraded empathy.

Daily, here at home, our local news reports carry stories of unspeakable acts cruelty committed by the state and others in the plundering of money and resources earmarked for the upkeep, improvement and maintenance of local municipalities – and the church is silent.

Men, women and children are hurt, maimed and murdered on a daily basis – and still the church remains silent.

We read in Matthews Gospel 25:35-40

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

The reality, in South Africa, today is:

I was hungry; the state misappropriated money intended to assist me – I am still hungry, and the church remains silent.

I was a stranger; the local community attacked me, burnt my house down and chased me.

The church remains silent.

I was sick; money needed to care for me has been misappropriated – I am still sick, and the church remains silent.

Empathy is when we the body of Christ holds the state accountable again and again, for the shameful statistics with regard to gender based violence, it's inhumanity towards vulnerable members in our society and the wanton thieving of our state coffers.

Empathy is not a sin; it is an act of love

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher" he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "What is written in the law and how do you read it?" The man answered "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all of your strength and with all of your mind and Love your neighbour as yourself"

"You have answered correctly" Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live".

But he wanted to justify himself so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

In reply, the parable Jesus told challenges all of us today: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers.

"They stripped him of his clothes beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

"But a Samaritan, as he travelled came to where the man was; and when he saw him took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey brought him to the inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him" he said, "and when I return I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert of the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him"

Jesus, told him, "Go and do likewise" Luke 10: 25-37

Brothers and Sisters, we need to do likewise and sincerely need to decide who it is we serve – is it Jesus or the evil empire.

If we decide to follow Jesus then we need to do so boldly by holding the empire accountable.

And finally, in the words of the late Pope Francis, "Jesus make my heart more like yours".

Gail Charalambous: A Sometimes Foolish Woman.