

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CIVILIZED?

Good morning.

There's an anecdote about anthropologist Margaret Mead that has been going viral on social media since the start of the pandemic last year.

The story goes that Mead was asked what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. She didn't talk about the earliest tools and technology, nor about fires for cooking and houses to live in. She said it was a 15,000 year old human skeleton with a broken femur which had healed. She went on to explain that animals with broken legs don't survive for long enough to heal, because they're vulnerable to predators, starvation and thirst. That healed femur was a sign that somebody had stayed with the injured person, tended to their wounds and protected them until they recovered. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts, said Mead.

That story may or may not be true. There's no evidence either way. Some might also give examples of other animals staying with their wounded. But the fact that it continues to do the rounds suggests that many of us want to believe it. We don't want to think that we would abandon the vulnerable and the wounded. We've become very aware of how dependent we are on one another, not just for help and support when we're sick or dying or self-isolating, but for protection from the virus by people following the advice about wearing masks, social distancing, and getting vaccinated. The fact that this country developed one of the best health care systems in the world and an extensive social welfare network shows that our desire to be a compassionate and caring society extends beyond individualism to a collective responsibility. When we speak of teaching "British values" to refugees to help them to integrate, surely these are among the values we want to share and perpetuate?

At their best religions, like civilizations, start with care for the vulnerable. That is their enduring strength and their survival depends upon it. Throughout his life, Jesus identified with the poor and the outcast – as one who was born into poverty among a colonised people, exiled as a refugee, rejected by his society, and tortured to death. He spoke of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner, the naked and the sick, and he said, "Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me."

In a week when our MPs are debating how to fund the NHS and social care, that seems like an important reminder for all of them to bear in mind, whatever their religion or beliefs.