

# The Strength of Compassion

## Scriptures

Exodus

Psalms 100

Romans 5.1-11

Matthew 9.35-10.15

## Opening

“And when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” When St Matthew says our Lord Jesus saw that helpless crowd, we know he saw so much more. He, who knows the very number of hairs on our heads, cannot look upon a crowd and see a nameless mass of people. Though a shepherd has hundreds of sheep, he knows each name and they know his voice. Jesus the Good Shepherd cannot possibly look away from his harassed and helpless flock. His compassion is an eruption of his love.

A year ago I visited the Grand Prismatic Spring in Yellowstone National Park. The Grand Prismatic Spring looks like a boiling lake, producing the most vibrant shades of blue, yellow, and orange you can see. To visit the largest lake, you ascend a boardwalk, pass a geyser and other steaming pools along the way. You walk alongside steaming tributaries and rivulets flowing down the mountain into the Firehole River.

The source of all this burning water lies 120 feet below the pool’s surface. Water surges through a crack in the earth into these vast pools, constantly pouring over into feeder pools and rivers downstream.

Such is the eruption of our Lord's compassion. The word "compassion" in Greek originally meant 'intestines.' In other words, the ancients believed compassion comes from the gut. It's no shallow emotion. Compassion surges from the depths. It is a visceral ache for another's pain.

The Greek meaning of 'compassion' enlightens, and the Latin meaning illuminates, as well. The Latin meaning of compassion is 'with suffering' or 'fellow suffering.'

## Mission and the Tender Heart

This is the source of Jesus' mission: his compassion. That's the force of his mission when he sees harassed and helpless crowds. It is not strategy or mission statements; it is a deep sharing with another's pain. Mission strategies without heart become gimmicks. Mission budgets don't mean a thing unless the heart is moved to become a fellow sufferer. The desert father Abba Agathon prayed "I want to find a leper, and give him my own body and take his." <sup>1</sup>That is real compassion on real mission. Remember the words of St Paul as well: "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." <sup>2</sup>

The saints have taught for 2,000 years that we should not fear anything in this world, except one thing: sin. Fear the day when love grows cold in your heart, when your heart is hardened towards another's suffering.

My spiritual director taught me a simple prayer ten years ago that has never left me: "Soften my heart where it has hardened." I've kept a kind of vigil with that prayer for a decade now and I've learned you have to cling to that prayer even more as you grow older. This world is not gentle, life is hard, and it's so easy for my heart to grow cold. Your heart only remains

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, ed. Costa Carras with Christos Yannaras, Kallistos of Diokleia, trans. Elizabeth Briere, 3rd ed., *Contemporary Greek Theologians* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 269.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:3, ESV

tender when you stay near the heart of Jesus. Without a tender heart, there is no way to join the mission of Jesus.

Anne Porter penned this poem about the hardened heart, entitled *A Famine Child* :

You had no food today  
And may have none tomorrow  
Child whose ribs are showing  
Under your dark skin

Unwilling to be wounded  
By the sight  
Of so unjust a hunger

Or to confront the anger  
Of the Lord who made you

We look away  
We turn away our faces.<sup>3</sup>

Our Lord Jesus became the Good Shepherd who would never look away, never turn away his face. His work and mission came from a tender heart.

Compassion has always been the catalyst, the fuel of God's mission. When the Lord God looked down on Israel in Egypt, he could not turn his face away. He heard their groaning for freedom. He looked on Israel just like Jesus looked on harassed and helpless crowds. He called one man from the whole nation, Moses, and said, "I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them."<sup>4</sup> God became their fellow sufferer; God became their Deliverer. After their deliverance, God spoke on Mount Sinai "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests." Be a holy nation, a nation of priests, a nation of *shepherds*.

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Porter, *Living Things: Collected Poems*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3.7-8

Full of compassion when he sees suffering crowds, Jesus looks to the twelve and the echoes of Sinai come down through the centuries. Twelve disciples represent twelve tribes of Israel at Mount Sinai. “Be my shepherds. Wherever you go say ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

## **An Upright Heart, Anchored in Christ**

The Lord Jesus sends twelve and sends them in pairs. He commands them to pray God will send more laborers. Here’s why: the harvest is overwhelming. Another rendering of Jesus’ words is “The harvest is large.”

Mission rises from the depths of the passionate heart, yet the mission is so much greater than the passion of a single heart. Pair one burning heart with another and you increase the strength and power to bring mercy to human misery. Replicate that several times and your movement grows, but it still isn’t enough. Only an entire kingdom of priests, set afire by love from the depths of the heart, is sufficient for the task.

I will never forget a Thursday morning in 2006 when I was a young pastor. I wish I could still call myself a young pastor but I don’t qualify anymore. Every Thursday I spent most of the day with Knoxville’s homeless and poor neighbors. We talked at lunch, we gathered in worship in the evening and shared dinner together. Every Thursday.

Out of nowhere one Thursday morning I was overcome by the suffering my friends shared every day. I left church, came home, and wept. I do not cry often. But this Thursday I wept.

I thank God he kept my heart tender with compassion, but my heart was also breaking. I wasn’t sure I could ever go back. I couldn’t carry that burden myself. I called my spiritual director in tears and he said, “You can’t carry everyone; only Jesus carries every burden.” If I was going to have longevity as a servant of God; if my heart was to remain tender; I had to be humbled by the vastness of this harvest. I never wanted my heart to grow cold, I didn’t want to turn my face away from human anguish, but I had to learn another way. My compassion needs an anchor.

I've got tomato plants and peppers growing nice and tall in the raised beds now. But the only way they attain height and remain upright is having a stake anchored right next to the roots, tying the vine to the stake. Without a stake a tomato vine might start out strong, but once it begins to bear fruit, the vine will collapse from the weight of its own fruit. A stake keeps the vine anchored so that it grows upright and keeps bearing fruit.

Our anchor is the very presence of Christ and the company of his saints. Anchored in Christ we have his authority over the powers of darkness. No one dare confront the powers of darkness without the authority of Jesus. And no one dare go alone into that contest with demonic spirits that oppress the harassed crowds. The task is too great to go alone. Jesus ties us together to stand upright and anchored in him.

## Anchored in Christ

Anchored in Him, Jesus sends his disciples into the trenches. They will enter the depths of human affliction with the authority of Christ. They will become healers. They will also encounter the very presence of evil with the power of Christ. They will drive out evil spirits buried deep in the souls of men and women who God made to be fully alive.

Evil spirits, the kingdom of darkness. That's what the apostles were facing in their day and that's what we're facing in ours. The Apostle Paul said, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against *the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*"<sup>5</sup>

I once heard the theologian Marva Dawn say that you know you're facing spiritual powers and evil forces when you face a problem that is so daunting that nothing will ever change. In Jesus' day most people viewed Rome as the greatest Enemy, that problem that would never change. But the real Enemy was Satan and his forces of evil. Oh, Rome became corrupt and oppressive, but Jesus came to overthrow the strongest oppressor, Satan and his demonic forces. //

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<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 6:12, ESV

God created human beings in dignity and beauty with many shades of color for his glory and *our mutual joy*. It is the Enemy of God who has corrupted minds, hearts, histories, and institutions with the wicked heresy of racism. / Our nation has become more polarized, more volatile, and more violent each passing year. These are important political matters right now, but make no mistake about their spiritual roots. God Almighty made us for holy communion, holy compassion, to bear one another's burdens, to be fellow sufferers with one another.

It's inspiring to read this Gospel story while we read the book of Acts in the Daily Office. The mighty works they performed in Jesus' Name these early days were multiplied tenfold in Jesus' Name. The apostles turned the world upside down, they spoke the truth of God to human powers. They saw strongholds fall because they depended on the authority of Jesus, not their own; they lived by the power of the Holy Spirit; they fed themselves on the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist.

If we're seeking healing, justice, and revival from these agonizing days, it must begin with the love of God revealed in the Eucharist. John Zizioulas said that only when we draw our moral attitudes from the new life we enjoy in the Eucharist will society have the leaven of divine communion that can spark a revival.<sup>6</sup> Take the Eucharist. Live the Eucharist. See the world, all its anguish *and* all its hope in light of the Eucharist where Christ reconciles us to himself and one another.

For Jesus Christ looked upon all us when we were harassed and helpless, captive by the Enemy's power. And 'while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.' His compassion led to his crucifixion. But his crucifixion revealed the eruption of his love. And the kingdom of God still comes near. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 130.