

Courage to be Compassionate

And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her ...

We are a people who can see more, perhaps than any other generation, the extent of human suffering. We see the floods in places like Pakistan. We see the clips of fathers desperately holding onto their children using last ounces of strength to push them to safety, some successfully, while others not. With the ubiquitous presence of cell phones, smart phones or camera phones, every emotionally charged situation can be captured: life and death; confrontation & its escalation; birth and new life; love and marriage; hunter and the hunted. Everything is captured. Everything is available to be seen. But though seeing more we feel less.

I suppose it's a kind of coping mechanism. To experience emotion is an energy expenditure. Deep down we know the power of emotions, especially those of compassion. We are afraid of becoming overwhelmed if we become too compassionate. We have no courage. We have no faith that if we embrace compassionate attitudes we will be sustained.

I pull out the paper earlier this week. It's foster parent's plan. It usually tumbles from the paper to the recycle bin, but this week I dare to hold it in my hands for two minutes. I study the picture. It's an arresting picture of a little girl and she's suffering in poverty, ignorance and neglect. I force myself, at least this week because I'm thinking about the compassion of the Christ and then, allow myself to watch undistracted some of the horrific images where struggles between life and death are played out against a soundtrack of desperate cries on u-tube. One parent manages to push a child to safety another not. I can't get too far. My soul cries out to God "Let me put the wall back up! Let the pictures and the sounds melt into harmless notes or shades

of incomprehensible colour! I convince myself that I'm at risk of becoming an emotional basketcase if I don't". But behold the Christ!

Jesus had courage to be compassionate. He had courage to be compassionate again and again and again. He would rest his body to be certain. He would fortify himself with prayer. He sustained himself with the food that his disciples did not know of. And then he would go back out into the world again and again and again and allow himself not just to see, but to feel. And then, most importantly, not just to feel but to act.

Already by this point in his ministry, Jesus had compassion on a couple of newlyweds about to run out of wine; he had compassion on a nobleman's son – total opposite social class than the woman Jesus has compassion on in our text; he had compassion on a man afflicted with demons; Peter's mother-in-law; the leper, the paralytic and the centurion's servant just described in the verses preceding this story. And then there are the unnamed multitudes brought to him by his disciples. Yet Jesus did not suffer compassion fatigue. I want to know his secret and it's not just "Well, he's really God".

That's not the answer since we believe in the two natures of Christ and our Lord in his humanity was susceptible to fatigue and the emotional load that makes a body falter. Nevertheless, He continued to demonstrate compassion right up until the last hours before his death when he healed the servant of the High Priest whose ear Peter cut off in Gethsemane. In the very hour of his death he had compassion on his mother Mary and disciple John entrusting each of them to each other's care. Jesus continued to have compassion even though many remained without healing. In his mind's eye he was not discouraged from showing compassion even as he envisioned and heard the future cries of the suffering in his present. Gazing out over Jerusalem "Jesus wept". Jesus wept but his compassionate resolve did not weaken. Even though

some would remain without healing in this life, Jesus did not let such facts “get him down” but rather he continued to show compassion.

What sustained him? Can it sustain us?

There is only one answer. It was the Word. It is the Word that called creation into being and the dead to rise from the dead. It’s the Word which remains ever active to bring the sinner to life and healing to all, whether in this world or the next. It is a word we trust by faith yet it’s not a total “blind faith”. Its power is rooted in things that actually happened which as John described in his epistle we are studying in bible class “that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have heard with our ears and handled with our hands”. It is a Word that can have power within us as we have the Christ dwelling within us. Hence, the connection of the epistle reading from Ephesians with our Old Testament and Gospel readings. ***“he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to know and be filled with the love of Christ and do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think”.***

It is the Word believed with the gift of faith that can sustain us also. It can sustain a compassionate attitude into a compassionate feeling to stir the heart and then the body which leads to acts of mercy.

Jesus saw the widowed mother at the village gate having lost her son, her last real connection to her husband, her means of support, and her last family. He saw and had the courage to embrace the feelings that naturally follow until, as the Greek language proclaims “his inward parts were moved”. That’s what compassion means in this text. You know the feeling just before you cry. He was stirred with emotion.

It takes courage to embrace that kind of emotion. But only by embracing it, can we be truly human. Only by embracing it can we be said to aspire to re-possess “the image of God”. Maybe it’s been a long time since you’ve turned off the cynicism, the judgmental attitude, or the callousness of our age and dare to be human, embracing the human emotion and reaction of compassion to such a depth. But dare to be courageous! Dare to follow in his steps.

And by faith, you will not falter, at least irretrievably. Ah! Here’s the secret inoculation against compassion fatigue - faith in the Word. Dare to be moved. For in being moved you find the cure for those in need. Jesus walked up to the funeral bier, touched it and by a simple word of command, commanded the dead man to arise”. His Word is our Word. Behold the compassion of the Christ!

By our Lord’s all powerful word that man was raised from the dead. Minutes from burial in the ground the dead came to life. He came to life by the word.

But do not be deceived. It didn’t come without exertion. Nothing Jesus did in this body came without exertion. When the woman came with the issue of blood to Jesus to touch the hem of the garment Jesus would remark how he “felt the power go out from him”.

But Jesus would, nevertheless persevere in his healing ministry and he invites us to follow with compassion. Have faith that you will be sustained to minister in such situations. Can I possibly bring healing to such desperate situations? The answer is, more than you’ll ever know. For Jesus has given us the very same thing he used to heal, namely his Word. It is a Word that begins with social ministry: food, water and shelter. It is an essential part as James says “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction (James 1:27)”. The Word of Compassion begins by going

out into the margins of society as Jesus did. One cannot be effectively spiritually unless one begins by being effective physically. It is as James said "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" Compassion begins with this in acting out faith and feeling but there is more.

Compassion is this but its more. It's the Word of God who is the resurrection and the life. Perhaps it will be the will of God that through the Word there will be healing in this life, but there is certainly that it will bring faith unto life everlasting in the next.

Now may we proclaim that Word which is the "resurrection and the life" to others. It may have the immediate effect of creating the mystery of faith in another and the power of the resurrection on the Last Day.

May we go forth in sharing the compassion of the Christ today!
Amen.