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ACTS OF COMPASSION IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS
An Exposition and an Application
to the Church's Ministry and the Christian Life

Supervisor

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of the Requirements for Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, who tenderly and compassionately brought me up.

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I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to all the people who proved invaluable in connection with this long essay.

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

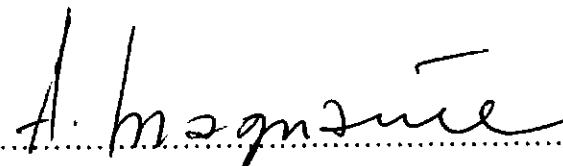
I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work, achieved through my personal reading, scientific research and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology. It has never been submitted to any other College or University for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The work at hand is an exposition of the acts of compassion in the synoptic gospels, most of which are associated with Jesus himself, whereby he is moved with compassion for people in different kinds of needs. Mostly, Jesus was moved with compassion to heal. He was also moved with compassion for the crowds. There are also other acts of compassion in the synoptic gospels that are not directly connected with Jesus. Such acts are found in some parables. Part of this introduction will list the occurrences of compassion in the synoptic gospels, besides looking at the meaning of the word “compassion” as it appears in the synoptics.

The essay will first look at the acts of compassion directly associated with Jesus, that is, compassion as an inner state of Jesus, in the first two chapters. The third chapter will explore other acts of compassion in the synoptic gospels, acts which occur in parables. The last chapter will give some practical application of how compassion is at work in the life of the Church and in the Christian life. Here, focus will be made especially on the sanctifying office of the Church and specifically on the sacraments of healing, and also on the pastoral office of the Church.

This is not an exegetical work and, therefore, exhaustive analysis of biblical texts will not be given. Where any exegesis is done, it is for the purpose of making clear the context and the manner in which the acts of compassion are happening. For example, in the first chapter, dealing with compassion for the leper (Mk 1:40-45), a deeper look at the meaning of the word ‘to touch’ – *haptomai* – is intended to show how far the compassion of Jesus took him in holding fast to the leper, a taboo of the day. Also, although many

other themes may be apparent in a given text where compassion occurs, only the act or theme of compassion will be explicated, unless exploring such other themes sheds light on the understanding of the act of compassion involved. Similarly, this work is focused on the synoptic gospels; if any references are made from the rest of the scriptures, it is only in so far as such references shed light on the understanding of the subject under discussion, that is, compassion.

It is important, however, to understand what compassion is and where it is so as to understand what it is that Jesus feels when the scriptures ascribe compassion to him.

The Greek word for compassion in the Gospels is *splagxizomai*. It is a verb, a word of action connected to the word *splagxon*, which is the word for innards, especially the intestines or the womb, and the higher viscera, the heart, the lungs and the liver.¹ The Hebrew word for compassion is *rahamin* and it has its origin in the experience of maternity, in the bowels, the entrails, or, as in common parlance, the ‘guts’. As such, the nature of compassion may be understood in the prime image of a mother’s intimate relationship with her newborn.² And as Downey continues to say,

Compassion may be understood as the capacity to be attracted and moved by the fragility, weakness and suffering of another. It is the ability to be vulnerable enough to undergo risk and loss for the good of another.³

Latin translations *compassio* convey the idea of suffering with another. All factors considered, *splagxizomai* is a rich concept that translation can not adequately express.⁴ According to Barth, “the expression is a strong one which defies translation.”⁵

¹ Cf. W. L. WALKER, “Compassion”, *The international Standard bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, 755.

² Cf. M. DOWNEY, “Compassion” In *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 192.

³ M. DOWNEY, “Compassion” In *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 192.

⁴ Cf. W. L. WALKER, “Compassion”, *The international Standard bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, 755.

⁵ K. BARTH, “The doctrine of Reconciliation”, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, 184.

In any case, compassion conveys the idea of ‘a yearning in the gut or bowels.’ In other words, what the Lord was feeling for the multitude involved a visceral reaction (i.e., He was “moved with compassion”). Actually, this word has been translated too weakly in our modern Bibles. For example, the *New Jerusalem Bible* uses the word “sorry” where the Greek *spagxnizomai* is used. But sorry just does not get it. It sounds like any other casual apology over tea break. *Spagxnizomai* is a very strong word conveying a powerful emotional feeling. It does more than describe plain pity or common compassion; it describes an emotion that moves one to the very depth of one’s being.

This word describes the Lord’s reaction upon seeing the multitude in the wilderness as being sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36). It is the same word used to describe His reaction to the leper who came to Him for healing (Mk 1:41), the two blind men who cried out for mercy (Mt 20:34), and the bereaved widow of Nain whose son had died (Lk 7:13). This same word describes the compassion the forgiving king had on the servant who was unable to pay his debt (Mt 18:27), and the compassion that compelled the father to run to his prodigal son to welcome him home (Lk 15:20), and the compassion of the Samaritan who rescued the wounded traveler on the Jericho road (Luke 10:33). In each case we are confronted with the deep visceral reaction that is always characteristic of authentic compassion.

The foregoing paragraph already mentions some incidents in which the word *splagxnizomai* occurs in the synoptics. It would be fitting, therefore, to have a quick overview of all such incidents before this introduction comes to an end.

There are four occurrences of compassion in the gospel of Mark, which is generally believed to be the first gospel written.⁶ The first is the encounter of Jesus with the leper in Mk 1:40-45, wherein Jesus was moved with compassion and touched the leper. The next is the healing of the demonic child in Mk 9:17-29, wherein the father of the boy asked for compassion from Jesus; then compassion for the crowds in Mk 6:30-42 and Mk 8:1-9. All the occurrences of compassion in Mark present compassion as an inner state of Jesus.

In as much as we can know a time-line for the Gospels, Matthew is the next Gospel to be written.⁷ There we find five references to this emotion: Mt 9:35-38, which parallels Mk 6:30-42 – Jesus was moved with compassion for crowds who were like sheep without shepherd; Mt 14:14 – Jesus was moved with compassion and cured their sick; Mt 15:32, which parallels Mk 8:1-9, – the feeding of the multitudes; Mt 18:27 which is part of a parable – the compassionate master; and Mt 20:34 – healing of the two blind men of Jericho. Except Matthew 18, the rest of the episodes have to do with compassion as an inner state of Jesus. Both Matthew 14 and Matthew 20 are associated with healings.

In Luke we find only three references to compassion. Of these only one points to an internal state which Jesus has, the other two occur in parables. That means we have to pay very careful attention to Luke 7:11-17 – the raising of the widow's son, where this internal state occurs. Jesus also talks of compassion in parables, and we'll look at two

⁶ This gospel was written between 60 and 70 AD, according to the earliest tradition. A note in the *African Bible* states that "there is now almost unanimous agreement that it was the first gospel to be written." V. ZINKURATIRE, A. COLACRAI, ed., *The African Bible*, 1689.

⁷ The Mathian gospel was written about 80AD, probably for a community whose many Jewish members had been recently excommunicated from official Judaism by the Jewish and largely pharisaic council of Jamnia. Cf. V. ZINKURATIRE, A. COLACRAI, ed., *The African Bible*, 1632.

very familiar ones in the gospel of Luke: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32).

The fourth gospel does not ascribe the quality of compassion to Jesus. Neither is compassion to be found in anything that Jesus says in the gospel. Yet we certainly do not see that Jesus, as described by John, is any less compassionate than the picture given in Matthew, Mark and Luke. We find a clue to this mystery in John chapter 11, the death and rising of Lazarus. In Jn 11:36, those who witness Jesus' tears comment that He loved Lazarus. The verb *phileo* is used, which indicates a human quality of affection and friendship. However, in Jn 11:5, the evangelist uses *agapao* to describe what Jesus felt for Lazarus and his sisters. *Agapao* indicates a deep, intimate, selfless love, and it is this quality of love which John attributes to Jesus that is John's version of compassion. It also appears here that, since there are no references to any other males associated with Martha and Mary,⁸ by raising Lazarus Jesus is doing something similar to the episode with the widow of Nain in Lk 7:11-17, as we shall see in chapter one.

But as we can already see in the foregoing paragraphs, compassion is something which is rare even in the synoptic Gospels. However, its rarity does not diminish its significance, as we will now see in the following chapters.

⁸ Life was going to be difficult for Martha and Mary without a male figure in their lives. In a patriarchal society, life was going to be grim for them without any male agency. See R. J. KARRIS, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NJBC (New Jerome Biblical Commentary), 43:95.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Jesus' Compassion seen through Acts of Healing

1.1 Introduction

We first hear about Jesus' compassion in Mk 1:40-45, with the healing of the leper. This emotion in Jesus is thus closely tied with his healing ministry. We also see another aspect of healing in Mk 9:17-29, the healing of the boy with the mute spirit. In Matthew, Jesus' compassion occurs only once in connection with healing, in the episode of the two blind men of Jericho (Mt 20:29-34). There is also a mention, though not in detail of healing of the crowds in Mt 9:35-38. We'll look at it, briefly though. In Luke, compassion occurs only once in connection with healing; the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:7-17). The report of this emotion is thus rare: a little sign that we need to contemplate this emotion of Jesus deeply when we encounter it.

1.2 Compassion for a Leper (Mk 1:40-45)

We are met with this emotion of Jesus in the very first chapter of Mark. Jesus encounters a leper and has compassion on him, as we read:

- 40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."
- 41 Moved with pity [compassion], Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"
- 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.
- 43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,

- 44 saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”
- 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.⁹

Previously in the Gospel of Mark Jesus has healed a demoniac, Peter’s mother-in-law, and many others who were sick or possessed with demons (Mk 1:21-34). Here the situation is different. A leper approaches Jesus for remedy. And immediately, without a second thought, Jesus touches the leper. The leper breaks a fundamental rule in approaching Jesus, and Jesus responds by breaking the law in touching the leper! Let us consider this scene more contextually, especially by looking at the law regarding lepers.

1.2.1 The Law Regarding Lepers

In Jesus’ day, the Greek word for leprosy, *lepra*, was used for a variety of “repulsive scaly skin diseases”¹⁰, and some forms were contagious. Its symptoms ranged from white patches on the skin to running sores to the loss of the fingers and toes and deadening of nerve endings.¹¹ William Barclay describes a leper thus:

The whole appearance of the face is changed, till the man loses his human appearance and looks, as the ancients said, “like a lion or a satyr ...” The nodules grow larger and larger. They ulcerate. Become staring. The voice becomes hoarse, and the breath wheezes because of the ulceration of the vocal chords. The hands and the feet always ulcerate. Slowly the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of the disease is nine years, and it ends in mental decay, coma, and ultimately death. The sufferer becomes utterly repulsive - both to himself and to others.¹²

Leprosy, like AIDS today, was a terrifying disease, because there was no known cure. Lepers not only had a terminal disease, but they were also social and religious

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations in this paper are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

¹⁰ D. J. HARRINGTON, “The gospel According to Mark” NJBC 41:13.

¹¹ J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 503.

¹² W. BARCLAY, *The Gospel of Mark*, 49.

outcasts because of the disease. For the Israelites, leprosy rendered its victims ceremonially unclean - that is, unfit to worship God, as we find in the Law of Moses:

The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. (Lev 13:3).

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Lev 13:45-46).

If a person contracted the contagious type, a priest declared him a leper and banished him from his home and city. He had to cry, "Unclean" when other people came near. Anyone who came in contact with a leper was also considered unclean. Lepers were not permitted to travel on the roadway, nor could they have any social contact with 'clean' people. Therefore, lepers were isolated from the rest of the community so that the members of the community could maintain their status as worshipers. The leper was sent to live in a community with other lepers until he died. Lepers were social outcasts.

So, this man we encounter in Mk 1:40-45 not only had a terminal disease, but he had also been separated from his family and friends. He was ceremonially unclean; he was unfit to worship God. He was dying, rejected and he had no comfort from family or friends or the worshipping community. He was truly hurting. He is on the outside. He is a non-entity. He was to be avoided in all things, especially physical contact, since, even if you were not contaminated by the disease, you were still rendered impure, outside of worship until the correct remedies had been applied, even if you had not contracted the disease. The taboo against touching lepers was absolute! But Jesus touched the leper, out of his compassion.

1.2.2 Moved with Compassion ... (Mk 1:42)

Jesus' compassion, however, brings him to touch the leper. He breaks a powerful, necessary and significant taboo in his society. In the Jewish culture, to touch a leper meant that one could not enter into the temple to worship, for he/she was rendered unclean. But moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand and touched him.

The Greek word used here for touching is *haptomai*,¹³ which means much more than a brushing of the arm or a casual contact that could have taken place. As Vines notes, the word is more rightly conveyed by the verb "to fasten to, to cling to, to lay hold of" and implies that a firm contact is being made between two objects.¹⁴ Therefore, it is probable that Jesus did not just merely touch him. Jesus was probably the first non-leper to have touched him since he had contracted the disease.

1.2.3 Jesus' Compassion Communicates Integrity

What happens when something holy/clean touches something unclean? The holy becomes contaminated, as we read in the scriptures:

- 11 Thus says the LORD of hosts: Ask the priests for a ruling:
- 12 If one carries consecrated meat in the fold of one's garment, and with the fold touches bread, or stew, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy? The priests answered, "No."
- 13 Then Haggai said, "If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" The priests answered, "Yes, it becomes unclean." (Hag 2:11-13).

What Haggai is saying is that the "holy" is defiled by unclean, but the unclean is not made holy by touching the holy. Therefore, we would expect that by touching the leper, Jesus would have become unholy/unclean, but not the leper becoming clean.

¹³ This is the same word, *haptomai*, used in John 20:17, where the Risen Lord tells Mary to stop holding unto him. Here, the Lord's prohibition as to clinging to him was indicative of the fact that communication with him would after his ascension, be by faith, through the spirit (Cf. W. E. VINE, *Vine's Complete Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 638).

¹⁴ Cf. W. E. VINE, *Vine's Complete Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 681.

The reverse, however, is true here. Instead of the disease and contamination being transmitted to Jesus, the leper is healed and reintegrated into society and worship. Thus, Jesus' compassion brings about two healings; healing from the physical disease of leprosy and healing from the social disease of ostracization. His compassion communicates integrity!

At the same time the episode ends with an irony. Though Jesus does not contract the disease of leprosy, he is ostracised by the very fact of his popularity – “Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country” (Mk 1:45b). Jesus has changed places with the leper without suffering contamination of disease.

1.2.4 An Edge to the Doctrine of Substitution

What Mark is doing is laying the foundation for what we call the doctrine of substitution;¹⁵ without contracting our disease, sin, Jesus changes places with us, suffering the human and community effects of the disease. Jesus' compassion raises the shadow of the cross in His life. Without contracting our disease, he bears the full weight of it, the total removal from society by execution, on the cross. This is the first step of that journey.

¹⁵ God's righteousness and justice demand that he execute the sentence he has decreed upon sin. “The person who sins shall die.” (Ezk 18:20); “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). This means that judgment must fall on every human being personally, because we are all sinners. However, the Word of God tells of that our judgment has, in fact fallen on another person, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the fact of Christ's taking the punishment that was meant for us that is known as the Doctrine of Substitution. (cf. Chester McCalley, *Substitution*, <http://www.realtime.net/~wdoud/topics/substit.html> 06/10/2009).

1.3 Healing of the Demonic Child (Mk 9:17-29)

The second and last time we come across compassion within the context of healing in Mark's Gospel is with the boy possessed by the mute spirit.

- 17 Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak;
- 18 and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so."
- 19 He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me."
- 20 And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.
- 21 Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood.
- 22 It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have compassion on us and help us."
- 23 Jesus said to him, "If you are able! - All things can be done for the one who believes."
- 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"
- 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!"
- 26 After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead."
- 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.
- 28 When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"
- 29 He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

The father of the boy asks Jesus to have compassion (vs. 22), Jesus responds by the concrete act of healing. Here, of course, the boy is reduced to an inhuman state by his condition. Much speculation ensues with regard to the nature of the boy's problem, which unfortunately, misses the boat entirely, even if we could try to describe it in modern medical terms. The child is dehumanized by his condition to the degree of being self-destructive. Jesus restores him by the contradiction of the child being reduced to a death-like state. Jesus' healing seems to intensify the problem rather than solve it. The reactions of the people are being contrasted to the honest proclamation of faith from the side of the child's father. The appearance of a corpse (another thing which can contaminate whoever touches it) does not stop Jesus reaching out to touch the boy, who is restored to his parents. Two things were needed, Jesus' rebuke to the possessing spirit and his helping hand to the affected child. Jesus once again brings someone into society who has been on the fringes. He does not rebuke the child, but the devil. He is not put off by the appearance of death but reaches out to lift the child up.

Being powerless in the face of a great evil is an experience that we all have. What triggers Jesus' response is the appeal to his compassion, so that he breaks a number of taboos, such as touching the leper, and touching a corpse, and so enabling them to journey again.

The first major journey is that of the child, or rather powerful young man living on the fringes of humanity, being self-destructive and inhuman. The boy's journey is from the grave to life; from the demonic to the divine.

The father also undergoes a journey. The child has remained a child in many ways needing care and constant vigilance. When the child is healed the father will gain a son

but lose a cause. This is often very frightening for us, as frightening as losing a loved one. When we no longer have anything to live for, is life worth living? At the same time the father is driven to ask Jesus to have compassion, full understanding for all those involved in this situation, and to give a response to all of them.

There is also an added burden seen in the father's response to Jesus' statement about faith. "I believe, help my unbelief!" (vs. 24). The world of this man is colored by the simple equation that he is to blame for the condition of his son. That sin and misfortune are somehow aligned and Jesus, as a holy man, need not pay attention to his misfortune, if it is deserved. Maybe that is why this man goes to the extraordinary length of throwing himself on Jesus' compassion.

Then we see the crowds, which in the Gospels have a habit of getting things awfully wrong. They have to accept that appearances do not reveal the real. They seem to be caught in the same world view as the boy's father, that somehow the father's sins are visited on the child, which is why the child is possessed.¹⁶ Like all crowds they might have been unbearably curious about the actual nature of the sin that causes so extraordinary an effect. When Jesus intervenes they get it wrong, "He is dead". One can almost see the rumor rippling through the crowd. However, this crowd is wrong in the most correct way possible. The young man is dead, dead to his dehumanizing past. Yet, they see a corpse and Jesus compounds the shock by reaching out to the unclean and they see the unclean sitting up to new life, a life which is different.

¹⁶ It was a common belief then that some conditions in people, like blindness, possession by demons, or physical deformities, were a result of the sins of the parents of the victims. See for example Jn 9:2 *His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

Here is the core of Jesus' act in this situation. He reaches out, despite the shock of the crowd, to the apparently unclean and gives it a new start, a new chance and a new life. The core of compassion is reaching out to the unclean!

1.3.1 Be Compassionate as Your Heavenly Father is Compassionate: From Ritual Holiness to Human Compassion

In Mark's gospel we see how ritual purity and holiness codes formed the context of the mission and message of Jesus. Personal and community life for the Hebrew people was regulated by a comprehensive and complex holiness code. By one count there are 613 *mizvot* or “commandments” in the Torah. The scribes mentioned 248 positive commandments and 365 prohibitions.¹⁷ The Levitical purity laws (*halakha*) regulated nearly every aspect of being human—birth, death, sex, gender, health, economics, jurisprudence, social relations, hygiene, marriage, behavior, and certainly ethnicity (Gentiles were automatically considered impure).

The purity laws and the holiness code of Leviticus chapters 11–26 specify in minute detail clean and unclean foods, purity rituals after childbirth or a menstrual cycle, regulations for skin infections and contaminated clothing or furniture, prohibitions against contact with a human corpse or dead animal, instructions about nocturnal emissions, laws regarding bodily discharges, agricultural guidelines about planting seeds and mating animals, and decrees about lawful sexual relationships, keeping the sabbath, forsaking idols, and even tattoos.¹⁸

Why so many rules? Some of these purity laws encoded simple common sense or moral ideals that we still follow today, like prohibitions against incest. Others regulated

¹⁷ Cf. A. STROGER, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Vol. I, 206.

¹⁸ Cf. J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 497.

hygiene and sanitation. Still others symbolized Israel's unique identity that differentiated its people from pagan nations. Ultimately, though, the purity laws and holiness code ritualized an exhortation from Yahweh: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). When the Psalmist asks, "O LORD, who may abide in your tent?" the "proper" response is that only people who are ritually clean may approach a holy God (Cf. Ps 15:1). At the center of the purity system, both literally and symbolically, stood the Temple, where one performed rites of purification.

How much or how little ordinary first-century Jews maintained ritual purity is debatable, but the Pharisees about whom we read so much in the gospels, certainly did. Throughout the gospels they criticized Jesus because of his flagrant disregard for ritual purity. Jesus the Jew touched a leper (Mk 1:41) as we saw above. And we can pick many other incidences even in the gospel of Mark alone where Jesus and his disciples disregarded ritual purity: his disciples did not fast (Mk 2:18f), he ignored Sabbath laws (Mk 2:23f), he allowed a woman with a discharge to touch him and he handled a corpse (Mk 5:21–42), his disciples ate without washing their hands (Mk 7:1-4), and he healed Gentiles (Mk 7:24f). Generally, the Pharisees considered Jesus and his followers as ritually unclean sinners who flaunted God's clear laws. In a sense they were right.

Given our human propensity for justifying ourselves and for scape-goating others, the purity laws lent themselves to a spiritual stratification or hierarchy between the ritually "clean" who considered themselves to be close to God, and the "unclean" who were shunned as impure sinners who were far from God. Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty,

polluted, or contaminated. But in word and in deed, Jesus ignored, disregarded and actively demolished these distinctions of ritual purity as a measure of spiritual status.

In Marcus Borg's view, Jesus turned the purity system with its "sharp social boundaries" on its head, and in its place he substituted a radically alternate social vision grounded in the compassion of God.¹⁹ The new community that Jesus announced would be characterized by interior compassion for everyone, not external compliance to a purity code; by egalitarian inclusivity rather than by hierarchical exclusivity; and by inward transformation rather than outward ritual. In place of "be holy, for I am holy (Lev 19:2), says Borg, Jesus deliberately substituted the call to "be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate" (Lk 6:36).

"No outcasts", writes Garry Wills, "were cast out far enough in Jesus' world to make him shun them — not Roman collaborators, not lepers, not prostitutes, not the crazed, not the possessed. Are there people now who could possibly be outside his encompassing love?"²⁰

Perhaps it is humbling in our day to ask; "what 'outcasts' do we sanctimoniously spurn as impure, unclean, dirty, contaminated, and, in our minds, far from God? The mentally ill, people who have married three or four times, wealthy executives, welfare recipients, people who hold conservative political opinions, single mothers or maybe people with AIDS? How have we distorted the self-sacrificing, egalitarian love of God into self-serving, exclusionary elitism? What boundaries do we wrongly build or might we bravely shatter?" Like Jesus, we should strive to bring to experience what Borg calls a

¹⁹ Cf. M. J. BORG, *The God we Never Knew; Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic contemporary Faith*, 95.

²⁰ G. WILLS, *What Jesus Meant*, 32.

“community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.”²¹

1.4 Compassion for Crowds of Sick People (Mt 9:35-38)

- 35 And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity.
- 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.
- 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;
- 38 pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Here Jesus is moved with compassion to cure and nourish. This episode is recorded in Mark 6, and here Matthew reworks the scene slightly.²² Therefore, we will look at this scene in more detail in the following chapter, when we deal with compassion for the sheep without shepherd.

²¹ J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: the historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith*, 53.

²² Mathew as a synoptic gospel has a close relation with Mark, the first synoptic. Sometimes episodes are reworked to fit the evangelist's aim. The NJBC notes that there are complexities in these four verses, which have weaved bits from Mark and the Q sources, and are purely transitional from the messianic mission to the mission of the disciples. Cf. B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Mathew*, NJBC, 42:66.

1.5 Compassion for Two Blind Men of Jericho (Mt 20:29-34)

Here we have the two blind beggars outside Jericho, to whom the compassion Jesus flows:

- 29 As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.
- 30 There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”
- 31 The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!”
- 32 Jesus stood still and called them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?”
- 33 They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.”
- 34 Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

This episode is a Matthian abbreviation of the Marcan story of Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52), whereby Mathew doubles the number of the blind men perhaps to overcome the impression that it is a merely private affair.²³

Now, if we had at our disposal the healing power of Jesus, would we bother to ask the blind men what they want? This is a fascinating insight into the way compassion works, especially when dealing with the power of healing that we all have in each other’s lives, the power to grant moral healing.²⁴ It is obvious that sight is what the blind need. But Jesus asks them what it is that they want him to do for them. The obvious answer ‘let our eyes be opened’ (vs.33) suggests, besides a literal meaning, ‘a desire for understanding faith on the part of many potential disciples.’²⁵

²³ Cf. B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Mathew*, NJBC, 42:123.

²⁴ We will see more of this in the parable of mutual forgiveness in chapter 3.

²⁵ B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Mathew*, NJBC, 42:123.

Imagine all the times that we have jumped to conclusions about what is wrong in the life of another, all the times we have jumped in with a solution to a problem, and found that we got it all wrong. In this episode, Jesus shows us that compassion takes time to listen to what the wounded really need without any power, even the power of healing.

Although the blind men were at least making a living from their disability²⁶ Jesus' presence ends their job opportunity. However, they regain an insight that impels them to follow Jesus. The result of the healing is discipleship to the cross.²⁷ Once their real need had been addressed and they were healed, they gained the insight to follow Jesus. Maybe we should bear this in mind a little more when it comes to dealing with moral crises or blindness in our own lives and the lives of others.

While the blind men cry for mercy, they receive compassion. We shall see more of this interplay between mercy and compassion later in the parable of mutual forgiveness (Mathew 18).

1.5.1 A Eucharistic Edge – the Kyrie, Lord Have Mercy

We also note that there is a Eucharistic edge to this episode. The Kyrie in the liturgy is very ancient and was most probably in place already at the time Luke was writing. The words these men use to address Jesus (Lord, have mercy on us – vs. 30) quickly entered into liturgical use.²⁸ We are the blind encountering Jesus in the Eucharist, being listened to.

²⁶ Although begging was shameful in the OT, many beggars especially who suffered from some bodily infirmity, used to sit by roadsides or temple gates and ask for alms (cf. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 87). This is more so with these two men, given that as we have seen above, this story is a Mathian abbreviation of the Marcan story where the blind man sat by the roadside begging (Mk 10:46).

²⁷ See R. A. CULPEPPER, "Mark 10:50: Why Mention the Garment?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101, 1982, p131-32. Here is the Marcan parallel of the story of Bartimaeus explicated.

²⁸ Cf. B. T. VIVIANO, *The Gospel According to Mathew*, NJBC, 42:123.

1.6 Raising of the Son of the Widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17)

The story is familiar; Jesus journeys and comes upon a funeral:

- 11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him.
- 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town.
- 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep."
- 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"
- 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.
- 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!"
- 17 This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

We often miss the fact that there are two dead people in this episode. The widow is socially dead.²⁹ Luke clearly emphasizes this by mentioning her status and that the dead young man is her only son. For a woman to have lost her only son in a patriarchal society meant that she was without any male agency, and her fate was grim.³⁰ Maybe to see better what provokes the compassion of Jesus to this woman, let's look at the fate of widows in the Israel society.

²⁹ A widow had to have a male figure around her as her source of identity and protection. If a woman's husband died, she was entitled to inheritance if only she had a son. Otherwise, she was repatriated to her father. It would be worse if the father is dead as well. A woman who had no man to defend her rights was an obvious victim for the exactions of a creditor and for any type of oppression, including murder and dishonest judgments. Cf. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 927.

³⁰ R. J. KARRIS, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NJBC, 43:95.

1.6.1 The Status of Widows in Israel

McKenzie gives us a fair description of what was the fate of widows in Israel. He

writes:

In ancient society the independent woman did not exist; she was a member of a family and dependent either upon her father or upon her husband. The position of a widow could therefore be difficult. She wore clothing to designate her condition (Gn 38: 14, 19). She could not inherit from her husband, and in the early period she was a part of the inheritance of the eldest son. If she was childless she returned to her father's house (Gn 38:11; Lv 22:13).³¹

He explains that a woman who had no man to defend her rights was an obvious victim to many crimes. For example, she could face the exactions of a creditor, as we read in a number of places.

Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves. (2 Kgs 4:1b).

They drive away the donkey of the orphan;
They take the widow's ox for a pledge. (Job 24:3).

The widow was also a victim of all sorts of oppression:

You have sent widows away empty-handed,
And the arms of the orphans you have crushed. (Job 22:9).

he alien residing within you suffers extortion;
The orphan and the widow are wronged in you. (Ez 22:7b).

At law, the widow had no defender and was therefore at the mercy of dishonest judges:

They do not defend the orphan,
And the widow's cause does not come before them. (Is 1:23b).

To turn aside the needy from justice
And to rob the poor of my people of their right,
That widows may be your spoil,
And that you may make the orphans your prey! (Is 10:2).

In a certain city there was a judge ... in that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' (Lk 18:2-3).

³¹ MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 927.

Generally, the OT literature (and even the time of Jesus), is full of examples of the widow as a symbol of powerlessness within Israel's patriarchal culture. Although Israelite law extended protection to them, "such law with no practical implementation was lifeless ideal."³² The livelihood of widows was from a share in the sacrificial festivals (Dt 16:11), tithes (Dt 14:28), and the gleanings of the cornfields, olive trees and vineyards (Dt 24:19-21).

The lot of widows in OT times is generally a hard one, and Christ refers to the widow's mite as an offering from the poorest of the poor (Mk 7:44)³³. He also preached against those who pray at great length while they devoured the houses of widows (Luke 20:47).

It is against this background of the fate of widows in Israel that Jesus encounters this widow of Nain, who is going to bury her only son. And Jesus knew very well what was going to become of her. Jesus was moved with compassion for her and restored both her and her son to life. "Jesus' compassion for someone in such dire need bypasses laws of ritual purity which dictate that one should not touch a corpse (Nm 19:11, 16)."³⁴

1.6.2 Anger and Compassion

There is an element of anger in compassion: anger against the social structures which dehumanize and exclude, which throw people into destitution. Through his acts of compassion, Jesus reverses this condition of powerlessness of the human condition. In the episode above, raising the child also means that the mother is restored to life (John places an episode with similar meaning at the foot of the cross, as we'll see shortly below). In

³² MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 927.

³³ Cf. The new Catholic Encyclopedia

³⁴ R. J. Karris, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NJBC, 43:95

bringing these two to life a challenge is placed in our hands to shape society in such a way that widows, and their parallels, are never killed by society. In the gospel of Luke, this reversal is extended to Samaritans and Gentiles.³⁵

Luke also has a special interest in women who form another lot of the dehumanized. Only he tells us of the prominence of women in Christ's ministry and specifically describes Jesus' relationship to women; it is a relationship which gives them full equality with men. As Ben Witherington III writes:

It is Elizabeth and Mary, not Zechariah and Joseph, who are first to receive the message of Christ's coming, who are praised and blessed by God's angels, and who are first to sing and prophesy about the Christ child. Luke presents these women not only as Witnesses to the events surrounding the births of John and Jesus, but also as active participants in God's Messianic purposes.³⁶

Now there might be a number of reasons for this, not the least being that Luke's investigations showed this particular characteristic of Jesus, while Matthew and Mark are largely blind to it since they view Jesus from other perspectives.

1.6.3 A Parallel in Jn 19:25-27 – 'Behold Your Son'

The scene is quite memorable. It takes place at the foot of the cross.

- 25 Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary of Magdala.
- 26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "woman, behold your son."
- 27 Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her to his home.

We have no instances in the Bible where Mary the mother of Jesus is described as a widow. But her situation is rather clear – soon she'll be all alone. Soon Jesus, her only

³⁵ Cf. T. JOHNSON, "The Gospel of Luke", *Sacra Pagina Series*, Vol. 3, 32.

³⁶ B. WITHERINGTON, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 134.

son³⁷ is dying and he was perhaps the only male figure in her life. Joseph her husband appears nowhere in the scene³⁸ and it is probable that Mary was already widowed; after all, why would John take her to his house? This means that, if now Jesus dies and she is left all alone, she would most likely face the same fate as any other widow in Israel, as we have seen above. With the death of Jesus, Mary too was going to be socially dead!

And in saving his own mother from such a deplorable situation, Jesus acts in almost the same way as he did with the widow of Nain – he gives her a son, “woman, behold your son.” And John takes care of her.

³⁷ Although the brothers [and sisters] of Jesus appear in several places in the scriptures – Mathew 12:46; Mark 3:32; 6:3; John 2:12; Acts 1:14 – they are not blood brothers and sisters of Jesus but his near relatives, probably either first or second cousins. Debate on this issue has produced enough scholarly evidence to support this claim.

³⁸ We simply don't know when Joseph, the husband of Mary died. We know that when Jesus was 12 years of age, both Mary and Joseph took him to the temple in Jerusalem, as recorded in the gospels. So Joseph was alive then. However, by the time Jesus started his ministry at the age of around 30, Joseph is not mentioned at all, except for a brief mention when the synagogue officials in Nazareth exclaim “isn't this the carpenter's son?”, nor does he appear in the accounts in which Mary appears (like the wedding at Cana and the crucifixion), so we can assume that by then Joseph is no longer around, and Mary was probably widowed.

1.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen five incidences in which the compassion of Jesus was moved into action. All these incidences are acts of healing and they include the healing of the leper (Mk 1:40-45), the healing of the demonic child (Mk 9:17-29), the healing a crowd of people (Mk 9:36), the healing of the two blind men of Jericho (Mt 20:29-34) and the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17).

What is characteristic of these people is that they form a group or groups of people whom the society ostracized and oppressed in different ways. The leper, the demonic boy who at one point looked like a corpse and the dead son of the widow were ritually unclean and therefore forbidden to touch. The demonic boy was also thought to be inflicted with the sins of his parents. The two blind men were shunned by the society for they were also victims of sin. And the widow, having lost her only son, was a sign of powerlessness and oppression in the society. These are the kind of people whom Jesus was moved with compassion for.

And as we have seen in this chapter, Jesus' compassion for these people went beyond the law and the acceptable norms of the society, to even touch the ritually unclean and the dead, restoring them to health, life and integrity. In so doing, the compassion of Jesus overturned the oppressive structures of the day, bringing an alternative social vision for the society, a vision guided by authentic human compassion instead of ritual purity. True compassion goes beyond visible structures and acceptable norms, and reaches to the core of humanity and human needs.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 Jesus' Compassion for Various Crowds

2.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, we have seen Jesus' compassion being provoked by individual circumstances, especially illnesses like leprosy that cast people out of the society, and other forms of destitution like widowhood. This chapter will however, investigate Jesus' compassion as also brought to the fore by desperate crowds. There are two of these episodes in Mark's Gospel, the first in chapter 6 and the second in chapter 8. Mathew and Luke do not have these episodes explicated in depth. Mark 6 is, however, quickly abbreviated in Matthew 9, which is a transition from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of the apostles. Therefore, we will in this chapter focus more on Mark.

2.2 Jesus' Compassion for the Scattered Crowds: Sheep Without a Shepherd (Mk 6:30-34; Mt 9:35-38)

Two synoptics (Mark and Matthew) express Jesus' compassion for the crowds that were scattered sheep without a shepherd. In Mark, compassion for the sheep without a shepherd is quickly followed by a literal feeding of the same by Jesus. But we'll leave that bit of the feeding in this topic and treat of it in the next topic. So let us look at the two texts from Mark and Matthew concerning the scattered sheep.

Text from mark 6

- 30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.
- 31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.
- 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.
- 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.
- 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mk 6:30-34).

The Matthian version:

- 35 And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity.
- 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.
- 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;
- 38 pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."
(Mt 9:35-38).

In these two episodes, or versions of same episode, the axes on which the whole encounter spins are Mk 6:34 and Mt 9:36, which according to the Daniel Harrington find their base in the Old Testament³⁹ as we read:

Who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd. (Num 27:17)

Then Micaiah said, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, 'These have no master; ...'" (1 Kgs 22:17)

³⁹ D. J. HARRINGTON, "The Gospel According to Mark" NJBC 41:42

So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered ... with no one to search or seek for them. (Ez 34:5-6)

Now, reading Matthew 6:34 at the time of Jesus, the first thing that comes to mind is, “Why would Jesus see the people as sheep without a shepherd when they had the Pharisees, Sadducees, Qumran sectarians, scribes, lawyers and priests, as shepherds of Israel, to guide them in all the flavors and practices of the faith of Israel at the time?” The Gospel is redolent with specifically the scribes, Pharisees and lawyers giving more than enough guidance to the wayward Jesus. Why then are the crowds wayward and lost? It would mean that these leaders of Israel were sleeping on the job. Rudolf comments that “the image of the scattered sheep without shepherd is taken from the Old Testament”⁴⁰ and therefore, in order to understand this better, let us investigate more closely the motif of a shepherd in the OT times, using Ezekiel 34 as the study text.

2.2.1 The Shepherd Motif in Old Testament

Let us consider this passage from Ezekiel 34, regarding shepherds:

- 1 The word of the LORD came to me:
- 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?
- 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.
- 4 The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.
- 5 So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts.

⁴⁰ R. SCHNACKNBURG, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Vol. I, 110

- 6 My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.
- 7 “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:
- 8 As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep;
- 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:
- 10 Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.
- 11 “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.
- 12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.
- 13 And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the fountains, and in all the inhabited places of the country.
- 14 I will feed them with good pasture, and upon the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on fat pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.
- 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.
- 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice.

In this passage from Ezekiel, we get the job description of the shepherds of Israel; the shepherd has a number of duties to fulfill, namely:

- i) To strengthen the weak
- ii) To heal the sick
- iii) To bind the crippled/wounded

iv) To bring back the strayed

v) To seek the lost (Vs 4).

But the shepherds have done none of these. On the contrary, they have fed themselves instead of the sheep; they eat the fat ones, clothe themselves with the wool and slaughter the fatlings. They have not strengthened the weak, they have not healed the sick, they have not bound up the crippled, they have not brought back the strayed, they have not sought the lost, and with force and harshness they have ruled them. (Vss 3-4).

Now this problem is as old as God's relationship with Israel. Throughout the prophetic literature, we encounter instances where the shepherds of Israel have proved to be failures. And, as McKenzie observes, almost all the uses of the title of shepherd find fault with the shepherds for failure to meet their responsibilities.⁴¹ They are stupid (Jer 10:21), they scatter the flock (Jer 23:1-2), they lead the people astray (Jer 50:6) and they have no understanding (Is 56:11f).

But specifically in this passage from Ezekiel 34, we get an insight into God's frustration with the shepherds of his people. The ringing condemnation of the shepherds ends with the phrase, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep". The psalms are redolent of the imagery of Yahweh as the shepherd of Israel. He is the true shepherd of Israel who leads Joseph as a flock (Ps 80:2) and his shepherdhood is well described in the classic Psalm 23 "the Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want ..."

In the messianic restoration, Yahweh will give shepherds after his own heart (Jer 3:15) and the prince from Bethlehem will feed his flock (Micah 5:3-4).⁴² Since this

⁴¹ Cf, MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 803.

⁴² This passage from Micah is partially cited by Matthew (2:6) in connection with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Commentators show Matthew as interpreting the fulfillment of Micah in Jesus, where

promise is seen to be fulfilled in Jesus, he quickly assumes this role and in the episode of Mathew 6, after teaching them many things, he literally fed them. However, his point of departure to both the teaching and the feeding was that they looked like sheep without a shepherd and that is what provoked his compassion for them. Therefore, we can see the tie to Jesus' own attitude towards the crowds; he is the fulfillment of that particular promise of God "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep". (Ez 34:15).

If Jesus saw the crowds as lacking a shepherd, then we can imagine what he saw if we recall the duties of a shepherd as we saw above from Ezekiel. If the crowds lacked such services we can therefore imagine them as weak, sick, wounded, strayed and lost. And one can only imagine further what Jesus felt for them given that the Pharisees, Sadducees, lawyers, priests and scribes who were supposed to be shepherding them were not doing so. He could not help it and so was he moved with compassion into action.

2.2.2 Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes as Failed Shepherds of Israel

The synoptics describe the leaders of Israel as the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians, and the chief priests. Where had they gone wrong, that the people should look like sheep without a shepherd? Let us look at Mathew 23:

- 13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.
- 14
- 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.
- 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.'

Mathew adds "who shall shepherd my people Israel". See W. A. MEEKS, ed. *Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1386. See also B. T. VIVIANO, "The Gospel according to Mathew", NJBC, 42:12

- 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?
- 18 And you say, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.'
- 19 How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?
- 20 So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it;
- 21 and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it;
- 22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.
- 23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.
- 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!
- 25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.
- 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.
- 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.
- 28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
- 29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,
- 30 and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'
- 31 Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets.
- 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors.
- 33 You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?

In these seven ‘woes’ as they are called, we can clearly get a picture of what the ‘shepherds’ of the people of Israel had become and have a taste of their leadership. They have not fulfilled the duties of a shepherd; instead, they hinder the spread of the gospel; engage in foolish casuistry regarding oaths; misplace priorities; pursue external things in place of internal matters, and murder the prophets. And by having Jesus use the familiar form of prophetic denunciation “woe ...” against them, Mathew provides his own community and other Jews of his day with a sharp warning against following the leadership of the scribes and Pharisees.⁴³

Therefore, we can see that, technically speaking, the people of Israel at the time of Jesus had no shepherd at all, in the correct meaning of the word. No wonder Jesus speaks in the right context when he cries out “I am the good shepherd”.

2.2.3 Jesus, the Compassionate Good Shepherd

“The figure of the shepherd is applied by Jesus both by himself and by others.”⁴⁴ His first mission and that of the apostles is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 10:6). He is the shepherd who leaves the 99 in the desert to search for one that goes astray,⁴⁵ and rejoices upon finding it (Mt 18:12-13).

But it is perhaps the figure of the good shepherd in John 10:1-21 that best depicts Jesus as a shepherd and his devotion to the flock, a devotion that culminated in his saving death – he lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:15). This parable in John10 comes in a context where Jesus had just finished criticizing the Jewish leadership after the incident of the man born blind and contrasts his leadership with theirs. But the Jewish leaders,

⁴³ D. J. HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Mathew*, 327.

⁴⁴ MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 804.

⁴⁵ Compare here with Ezekiel 34:4, that the shepherds of Israel have not searched for stray sheep. Jesus as the good shepherd does exactly that.

whom Jesus had described as blind (Jn 9:39-41) and as incapable of hearing (Jn 8:43,47), are unmoved by Jesus' attack on them. And, although Jesus did not explicitly refer to the Jewish leaders as evil shepherds, "his condemnation of the manner in which they carried out their office can better be understood in the light of the Old Testament's condemnation of the evil shepherds of Israel,"⁴⁶ as we have seen above, especially in the text of Ezekiel who prophesied at the time of the Babylonian exile.⁴⁷

Jesus severe criticism of the Jewish leaders' exercise of their role and of the plight of the sheep who have not been properly cared for calls to mind the synoptic reference to Jesus compassion for the crowds: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9:36). Huckle and Visokay try to explain what provoked the compassion of Jesus for the crowds:

In Jesus' mind, the scribes and Pharisees had become so enamored with the perfection they had reached in their knowledge and observance of the law, and had become so focused on themselves, that they had set themselves apart from the very people they were to nourish. In fact, they spoke of the people with contempt and treated them in like manner rather than giving them the nourishment they craved.⁴⁸

And so, the failure of the Jewish leaders to care with love for the people of Israel had indeed left them as a flock without a shepherd. However, in Jesus the good shepherd, the Lord's promise was fulfilled:

And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the fountains, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and upon the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on fat pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. (Ez 34:13-15)

⁴⁶ J. J. HUCKLE., P. VISOKAY, *The Gospel According to John*, 141

⁴⁷ Cf. J. J. HUCKLE., P. VISOKAY, *The Gospel According to John*, 141

⁴⁸ Cf. J. J. HUCKLE., P. VISOKAY, *The Gospel According to John*, 142

On a light note, in this passage about the good shepherd, let us notice the use of the title “I AM” by Jesus. “I AM” is one of the Christological titles of Jesus.⁴⁹ by saying that “I AM the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11, 14), Jesus shows that being a shepherd for the people is at the core of his identity and mission. His absence as the good shepherd was soon to be felt; his arrest, passion and death leave his disciples scattered like sheep when the shepherd is struck (Mt 26:31f). It is probable, then, that out of such experience of Jesus, the figure of him as the good shepherd became a favorite in the early Christian centuries and as McKenzie notes, perhaps the earliest artistic representations of Jesus show him as the good shepherd.⁵⁰

2.3 Compassion for a Hungry Crowd stuck in the Desert

(Mk 8:1-9)

In the foregoing episode regarding the scattered crowds, compassion for the ‘sheep without shepherd’ is immediately followed by the literal feeding of same sheep. A similar scene is repeated in Mark 8 as we read:

- 1 In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them,
- 2 “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.
- 3 If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way-- and some of them have come from a great distance.”
- 4 His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?”
- 5 He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.”

⁴⁹ Cf F. Just, “Christological Titles in the new Testament”, http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Christological_Titles.htm, accessed 15/10/2009.

⁵⁰ MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 804.

- 6 Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd.
- 7 They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed.
- 8 They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.
- 9 Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away.
- 10 And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

This is the second time in Mark's gospel that Jesus feeds the multitudes, that is, after the episode in Mk 6:35-42. In the first instance, he had had compassion on them because they looked like sheep without a shepherd, after which he taught them many things and fed them. In this second instance, Jesus was moved with compassion for the crowds because they had stayed with him for three days without eating.

Although scholars do not rule out the possibility of two feeding incidences in the Gospel of Mark, they see it as highly improbable.⁵¹ So, why does Mark put in a second feeding instance? According to Hugh Anderson, who sees the second feeding episode as intended for a Gentile setting, the duplicate version is meant to put emphasis on the compassion of Jesus.⁵² Rudolf Schnackenburg reaffirms this point when he says that "the story shows no special characteristics compared with the first meal account, except that Jesus' *compassion with the people* receives a stronger emphasis."⁵³ Actually for

⁵¹ For instance, the disciples' bewilderment of what is to be done, evident from their question in 8:4, would be inconceivable on top of a previous miraculous feeding. There are also many correspondences in detail between the two accounts, which suggest that they are duplicate versions of the same story. See H. ANDERSON, "The Gospel of Mark", 194.

⁵² H. ANDERSON, "The Gospel of Mark", 194-195.

⁵³ R. SCHNACKENBURG, *The gospel According to Mark*, Vol. I, 136.

Schnackenburg, the second multiplication of bread was for Mark a sign of Jesus' compassion for the pagans, as the first was such for the people of Israel.⁵⁴

We can therefore see that Jesus' compassion was for all people and not restricted to the people of Israel only. It is fitting that this episode is treated of here, at the conclusion of compassion as an inner state of Jesus, to show that his compassion reached to the Gentiles as well as to Israel. The only other time that compassion is expressed to those outside Israel, is with the Good Samaritan, a parable which we are going to see in the next chapter.

On a lighter note, we can reflect on the disciples' feeling of lack of anything to care for the people. After Jesus taught the crowd, the disciples felt themselves powerless to nourish the people when Jesus turned their request to feed the people back on them. What emerges from the dialogue is very little; seven loaves and a few small fish, but which is enough once it goes through the hands of Jesus.

Feeding with bread in the desert is, of course, the provenance of God Himself. That compassion can nourish to this extent means that there is an element of divine presence in human compassion. When compassion is fully unfolded in the human heart divine things begin to happen.

There is also a Eucharistic hint in this episode. The disciples gave what was not enough, but after Jesus blessed it, it was more than enough. In the Eucharistic sacrifice, we offer what is not enough, mere bread and wine, but in return we get more than enough, the body and blood of Jesus. And so in the same way that the crowds were nourished and strengthened to reach their places, even those who had come a long way, so we too are nourished and strengthened in the Eucharist to reach the Promised Land.

⁵⁴ Cf. R. SCHNACKENBURG, *The gospel According to Mark, Vol. I*, 135

2.4 Conclusion

In this second chapter, we have seen how the compassion of Jesus was moved by the crowds. First, we have seen Jesus' compassion for the crowds that were harassed and scattered like a sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:30-42; Mt 9:35-38). We have seen how the people of Israel had lived for long without caring shepherds, until the time of Jesus, when even the Pharisees and scribes, the supposed shepherds, had failed in their duties. Through his compassion for the crowds, Jesus became the fulfillment of the old prophecy of Ezekiel, that God himself will shepherd his people (Cf. Ez 34:11, 15). Later on, Jesus proclaimed himself to be the true shepherd (Cf. Jn 10:1-21).

We have also seen Jesus' compassion for the hungry crowd (Mk 8:1-9) which he fed. This closely connects to the idea of Jesus being a shepherd who feeds his sheep. Although the incidents in which Jesus is shown to have had compassion for the crowds in the synoptic gospels are relatively few, precisely three as we have seen in this chapter, we must acknowledge that, as Jon Sobrino says, Jesus compassion for the crowds was not a merely occasional attitude in his life, but one that shaped his entire life and mission.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ J. SOBRINO, "The economics of Ecclesia: A Poor Church is a Church rich in Compassion", 89.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 Parables on Compassion

3.1 Introduction

In the last two chapters, we have investigated compassion as springing up from within Jesus himself. In this chapter, we will look at other acts of compassion mentioned in the synoptics, acts that do not come from within Jesus himself. However, worth noting is that even though they are not coming from within Jesus himself, it is Jesus who talks about them. They are within the context of parables. And so we can see that all acts of compassion in the gospels almost exclusively were acts of Jesus, within and without.

There are three parables which bring to the fore this notion of compassion. Matthew has one, the parable of the Uncompassionate Servant (Mt 18:21-35). Luke has the other two: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32).

3.2 Compassion in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:21-35)

This parable stands out in biblical history as a narrative which many people see as forgiveness beyond imagination. It goes thus:

- 21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"
- 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

- 23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.
- 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;
- 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.
- 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’
- 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.
- 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’
- 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.
- 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.
- 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.
- 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.
- 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’
- 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.
- 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

As with any parable, there is a main thrust and the rest of the details are secondary, sometimes even irrelevant. The principle question here has to do with compassion unto forgiveness (vs. 27), so that the reference to the kingdom is secondary.

We must realize that the king is somewhat reckless to entrust so much money to a slave. We must realize that the slave must have really been spending to make his way

through so much money. It is impossible to determine an exact equivalent of the huge amount incurred by the servant, since money values have changed a great deal since that day. According to Matthew 20:2, a day's wage was a denarius. It is estimated that there were 6,000 denarii in a talent,⁵⁶ and the debt of the servant was 10,000 talents (vs. 24). This would translate to 60 million denarii. Therefore, if the servant was to work for six days a week to settle his debt, it would take him 191,693 years! And so, whatever equivalence we can work on, that huge sum is an exaggeration. Barker appraises it thus:

To give some idea of what a colossal debt this was, the total tax income of the five provinces of Palestine (Judaea, Peraea, Idumaea, Samaria, and Galilee) was only eight hundred talents. In other words, the servant's debt was over ten times the amount of the national budget.⁵⁷

However, huge as this debt was, the master forgave him! Why? The master is represented as so moved by compassion that he did far more than was asked and forgave the entire debt. With the servant being so hopeless, the master is first moved with compassion; next, he liberates his debtor from prison; and then cancels the debt freely. The debt cancellation was therefore purely out of sheer goodness, as John Gill relates:

Then the Lord of that servant was moved with compassion, or had compassion on him, showed pity to him, and extended mercy towards him; not that he was moved hereunto by any actions of his, as his prostrating himself before him, and his worshipping him, nor by his cries and entreaties, nor by his promises, which were not at all to be depended on, but by his own goodness, and will; for not to anything that this man said, or did, nor to any deserts of his, but to the pure mercy, and free grace of God ...⁵⁸

And rightly, that is what compassion can do. Once one is moved with compassion, one can be unreasonably kind.

⁵⁶ Cf. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 582.

⁵⁷ W. P. BARKER, *As Matthew Saw the Master*, 89.

⁵⁸ J. GILL, "Commentary on Matthew 18:27," *The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible*, <http://www.searchgodsword.org/com/geb/view.cgi?book=mt&chapter=018&verse=027>, 20/10/09.

3.2.1 Compassion as an Aspect of Forgiveness

Many a time we seek revenge even for little transgressions. The amount for which the wicked servant in this parable was forgiven is too large to imagine. And so we can say that that forgiveness in its real sense is insane! When Peter asked Jesus how many times to forgive, Jesus answered him “seventy-seven times” (vs. 22). In other words, we should do it till we get it right! And it is not easy to do so, unless our hearts are compassionate enough, because sometimes forgiveness does not make sense, especially when we have been gravely violated.

In thinking of how forgiveness is not easy, we can call to mind the verses preceding Peter’s question on forgiveness (Mt 18:15-20, on mutual correction); if one wrongs you, confront him first. If he does not listen to you, call two or three witnesses and if there is no change inform the church. But if no change still, treat him as a tax collector or Gentile. But the question which quickly comes to mind is; ‘how did Jesus treat tax collectors and Gentiles, if we are to follow his example?’ He made tax collectors his disciples and ate with them (cf. Mt 9:9-13) and ministered to the Gentiles (Mt 4:24-25; 8:5-13). In other words, we cannot get away from forgiveness. And since many of the things we have to forgive are difficult, our hearts need to be compassionate enough to forgive and let go. Only compassion could make the master forgive the huge debt.

Whereas Peter sought to limit forgiveness, Jesus opens him to the possibility of limitless forgiveness, and, in doing so, he states that it is possible for us to do this! We need therefore, to be aware that giving forgiveness even when it has not been asked for is also a possibility and a spiritual exercise. We often find it hard to forgive, because we have no practice and only unpack our forgiveness and compassion when the occasion

demands. A true spiritual and Christian practice is to practise compassion and forgiveness even when there is no “reason” to do so. If an athlete only used the competition situation to practise, he would be completely incompetent. How then can we think the spiritual life to be different?

3.2.2 A lead to God’s Pardoning Grace

The king’s forgiveness, without any merit on the part of the unmerciful servant, indicates God’s grace. It is a forgiveness that is unimaginable. It is a story of grace and mercy, in which Jesus draws a distinction between a debt that is impossible to repay and a trifling debt that is easily manageable. When one compares the two debts, one quickly sees the mercy and grace of God in his dealings with the sins of humanity. Forgiveness from God is without a cause from one’s own merits; forgiveness is grace in action; it is pure compassion. We are all unreasonably gifted by God, and that knowledge and experience should impel every action we undertake, especially in relationship to others.

3.3 Compassion in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a most popular one, and perhaps the simplest parable.⁵⁹ It goes thus:

- 25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
- 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

⁵⁹ M. G. Collins, *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, <http://bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Library.sr/The-Parable-of-Good-Samaritan.htm> 25/10/09

- 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."
- 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."
- 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"
- 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.
- 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.
- 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.
- 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity [compassion].
- 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.
- 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'
- 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"
- 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Here it is important to start from the end. Note how the lawyer cannot even say the word, "Samaritan" but rather, "The one who showed him mercy" (vs. 37). The lawyer avoids the hated word *Samaritan*, because "to the Jews, the Samaritans were a heretical and schismatic group of spurious worshipers of the God of Israel, who were detested even more than pagans."⁶⁰ This is a telling little detail of Jesus' society that Luke has captured with great skill in this parable. The Samaritans were a Gentile people mostly living in Samaria, and Jews thought of them as inferior and hated them. It probably shocked the

⁶⁰ MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 765.

lawyer to hear Jesus speak well of the Samaritan as the only one who acted compassionately toward the beaten traveler.

See also how the lawyer cannot also use the word compassion in this context; he can neither say who did it nor what he did. Why? The lawyer is aware that Jesus is using a loaded word; compassion is an attribute of God and so the lawyer cannot bring the divine together with the Samaritan. Yet, in the parable, it is only the Samaritan who acts with divine motivation.⁶¹ When he saw the victim, he was moved with compassion, and went to him. Therefore, “the Samaritan not only intervenes on behalf of the beaten traveler, he goes beyond the call of duty to ensure the man receives care until he has recovered. He does not contemplate his action but reacts from the pre-shaped compassion of his true character.”⁶²

He did not let ritual rules of purity hinder his charity. His sympathy did not remain ineffective. At the end of the day, his actions may not have been very heroic; after all, two denarii was only two days wages. But the bottom line to this parable remains that it is only he who acted out of love, without regard to the laws of purity and race, and did everything that was necessary to save the dying person. Compassion moved him beyond the *status quo* of his relation with the Jews, for the Samaritans were the national enemies of the Jews and they had no dealings whatever with one another⁶³ and their hatred was mutual.⁶⁴

⁶¹ The word used here for the feeling of the Samaritan is the same Greek word *splagxizomai* as used for Jesus when he is moved with compassion, which signifies compassion out of the depth of one's character.

⁶² M. G. Collins, “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” <http://bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Library.sr/The-Parable-of-Good-Samaritan.htm> 25/10/09.

⁶³ See the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:5-42). Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans (Vs. 9).

⁶⁴ Cf. A. STROGER, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Vol. I, 209.

We must realize that the lawyer has been shaken to the very roots of his being, especially when Jesus tells him to go and act like a Samaritan. The lawyer must have been deeply scandalized for, as McKenzie notes, “there was no deeper breach of human relation in the contemporary world than the feud of Jews and Samaritans, and the breadth and depth of Jesus’ doctrine of love could demand no greater act of a Jew than to accept a Samaritan as a brother.”⁶⁵

The parable of the compassionate Samaritan, therefore, depicts a startling alternative way of living. The Samaritan was not moved merely by the plight of another human being, even one of another ethnic group. The injured man belonged to the society that had ostracized the Samaritans. He was an adversary. And this is the kind of compassion that is set before us as model. It should be noted that “such an attitude of openness is quite difficult to maintain in a society that is quick to condemn and slow to forgive, a society that not only justifies but actually glorifies revenge, a society that regards every stranger as a potential adversary.”⁶⁶

Jesus does not mention what the priest and Levite specifically felt, but He clearly shows that mercy began with the Samaritan having compassion for the wounded man.⁶⁷ Then, the Samaritan made a number of sacrifices to meet the miserable man’s needs. Often we are moved to make some small sacrifice toward relieving another’s misery, but never mercifully follow it through, as the Samaritan did. This whole narrative describes working compassion and love, as contrasted to selfishness or hate.

⁶⁵ MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 766.

⁶⁶ D. BERGANT, “Compassion in the bible”, in *Compassionate Ministry*, 33.

⁶⁷ The priest and the Levite were the supposedly good people who kept the law; a law that was summed up in the love of God and the love of neighbor (Cf. Lk 10:27), and yet they could not show that love to the dying man.

3.4 Compassion in the Parable of the Prodigal Son

(Lk 15:11-32)

This is the third and the last parable in which we encounter acts of compassion, the merciful father of the prodigal son.

- 11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.
- 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.
- 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.
- 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.
- 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.
- 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.
- 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!
- 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;
- 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'
- 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.
- 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'
- 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
- 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;
- 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

- 25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.
- 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.
- 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’
- 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.
- 29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.
- 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’
- 31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.
- 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

The parable of the Prodigal Son is preceded by the two parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin (Lk 15:1-10). The good shepherd who leaves the 99 in the wilderness to search for the lost one, and the good housewife who turns her house upside down to get her coin, serve to introduce the parable of the father who runs to welcome back his wayward son. The Harper Study Bible makes this connection about the lost son to the other two parables:

The parable of the lost son must be understood in the light of these two parables which precede it: the lost sheep and the lost coin. The sheep and the coin are now replaced by a human being. The shepherd and the woman now become our father in heaven.⁶⁸

In these three parables, “Luke champions the theme that God’s mercy breaks through all human restrictions of how God should act toward sinners.”⁶⁹ It is here that especially the interplay between mercy and compassion is brought to the fore:

⁶⁸ H. LINDSEL, ed., *Harper Study Bible*, 1562.

God's mercy, indeed, is as foolish as a shepherd who abandons 99 sheep to save one, as a woman who turns her house upside down to recover a paltry sum, and as a Jewish father who joyfully welcomes home his wastrel son who has become a gentile.⁷⁰

The son had become completely wayward, and like a gentile, especially by his feeding of pigs.⁷¹ Yet, when his father saw him he was moved with compassion and ran to him, a running which was not becoming behavior for an elderly oriental gentleman, according to Karris.⁷² Luke uses the same verb, *splangnizomai*, as was attributed to Jesus in Lk 7:43 regarding the widow of Nain and the Good Samaritan in Lk 10:33, to describe the reaction of the father. The father reacted in a similar way as Jesus would when moved with compassion. As John Gill says of the merciful father regarding the lost son,

He had compassion on him, and his heart of pity moved towards him, he being as one grieved in spirit for his sins, and wounded with a sense of them, and wanting a view of pardon, as starving and famishing, and as naked, and without clothing.⁷³

Here, the initiative is shifted to the father who sees, feels, runs, embraces and kisses his son.⁷⁴ There was no sternness or need of prayers; the father no sooner saw the wanderer coming than he rushed to meet him. The father does not even wait for the confession the son had resolved to make, for "Love cannot wait when it recognizes the purpose."⁷⁵

⁶⁹ R. J. KARRIS, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NJBC, 43:146.

⁷⁰ R. J. KARRIS, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NJBC, 43:146.

⁷¹ For the pious Jew no worse image for the estrangement from God could be imagined than that one should find himself serving pigs and even lusting after their slops. The pig was the sacrificial animal in Greek and Roman worship. In the Jewish eyes, eating pork was equivalent to paganism and apostasy from Judaism, especially as we see in 4 Maccabees, on the martyrdom of Eleazar. The pig was also the symbol of the Roman might. See R. J. KARRIS, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NJBC, 43:107.

⁷² R. J. KARRIS, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NJBC, 43:147.

⁷³ J. Gill, "Commentary on Luke 15:20".

<http://www.searchgodsword.org/com/geb/view.cgi?book=lu&chapter=015&verse=020>, 1/11/09.

⁷⁴ Cf. L. T. JOHNSON, "The Gospel of Luke", 237. The embrace and kiss recall the recognition scene in Gn 45:14-15 where Joseph embraces and kisses Benjamin as his brother, and Gn 46:29 he greets Jacob his father.

⁷⁵ B. W. JOHNSON, "Commentary on Luke 15".

<http://www.searchgodsword.org/com/pnt/view.cgi?book=lu&chapter=015> 1/11/09.

Thinking of this parable in the spiritual realm, God has shown us his great compassion in this parable of Jesus about the prodigal son. If we have squandered our blessings, he still welcomes us back with open arms. His mercy is greater than our sins. Now that we have seen the measure of his love, we should also forgive and welcome back to our company those who have wronged us. This is different from our natural desire, and the desire of the older son, because more often than not, when people make mistakes we want to rub it in rather than relieve them!

God is moved by his compassion for us, and his compassion is drawn to humility. Like a river of love, God's compassion flows to the lowest situation in our lives, our greatest needs, our greatest weaknesses, and our greatest failures. Whatever we lay low before the Lord, he will be drawn to that area of our life. God gives grace to the humble, and his strength is made perfect in our weaknesses (Cf. 2 Cor 12:9).

This parable begs for our contemplation, to go over it placing ourselves in the role of each of the characters described,⁷⁶ since all of them together give an insight into how compassion functions or fails in us.

⁷⁶ In this episode we have just dwelt on the compassion of the father and have not treated of other key characters in the parable. For example, the older son is seen by many commentators to represent the self-righteous, like the Pharisees and the scribes in the preceding two parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. He is also seen to represent Jews who could not welcome in converted gentiles. The lost son on his part is seen to represent a model of a typical sinner and what sin can do, and he is also seen as a good model of repentance.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen three episodes in the synoptic gospels in which compassion does not come from within Jesus himself. In the three parables that we have seen in this chapter, the fundamental way in which compassion operates is basically the same. All three incidents use the same Greek verb, *splagxizomai*, as is used elsewhere regarding Jesus himself. The way the three characters namely, the compassionate master, the Samaritan and the merciful father react to the various situations that provoke their compassion, is very similar to the way Jesus reacted to various situations that provoked his compassion, as we saw in the previous two chapters, i.e., going to great lengths to save someone from a deplorable situation. Imagine the servant with the huge debt he could not pay (Mt 18:21-35), or the man laying half dead on the road (Lk 10:25-37), or the lost son who has acted in such a selfish manner (Lk 15:11-32): what could save these people from such awful, unacceptable and unpardonable situations? Only a compassionate heart could reach them.

We learn in this chapter that, even we as human beings can act with the same divine motivations as Jesus did, and as God actually does. The Compassionate Master, the Good Samaritan and the Merciful Father have led the way for us. We should follow suit.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 The Compassionate Ministry; Church and Compassion

4.1 Introduction

In the last three chapters, we have focused on the acts of compassion in the Gospels, acts from within Jesus himself and in the parables, and we have seen that the moments at which this emotion occurred are rather rare. When Jesus died, rose and ascended into heaven, he left on earth his bride, the Church, to carry on his ministry on earth. Therefore, what Christ was to the people of two thousand years ago, the Church should be to the people of today. Jesus' compassion should be reflected to the people by the Church, and the Christian faithful who are members of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12ff).

Now, the Church exercises her ministry through a threefold office of teaching, governing, and sanctifying given to her by Christ. This chapter will therefore concern itself with how, through these various offices, the Church carries on the work of compassion for the people of today, and how the Christian faithful can also live the compassionate life. Most of the acts of compassion we have seen in the preceding chapters revolve around the sick, such as the leper (Mk 1:40-45), the demonic child (Mk 9:17-29), crowds of sick people (Mk 9:36), the blind (Mt 20:29-34) and a victim of violent robbery (Lk 10:25-37). Today, one way in which the Church reaches to the sick is through the Sacrament of Anointing, and therefore, we'll treat of this Sacrament here as one way of continuing the compassion of Jesus to the sick.

We have also seen in the preceding chapters how compassion is closely connected with forgiveness, especially in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:21-35) and the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). Therefore we will also look at the Sacrament of Reconciliation as another way of communicating compassion by the Church. The Sacrament of Anointing and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are generally referred to as the Sacraments of Healing

We have also seen in the previous chapters compassion directed to other people with various needs, like the helpless and harassed crowds that Jesus taught and fed (Mk 6:30-42; 8:1-9; Mt 9:35-38). Therefore we will also look at the pastoral office of the Church and how it should communicate compassion to people in various needs.

4.2 Church's Compassion expressed through the Sacraments of Healing

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* mentions two Sacraments of Healing, namely the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, through which sins are forgiven and bodily health is restored.⁷⁷ Let us see how the Church expresses her compassion through these Sacraments.

4.2.1 The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

In the first chapter, we dealt specifically with the compassion of Jesus for the sick, especially for those who suffered diseases that ostracized them from the community. The situation today may not have changed much from the time of Jesus. Today, the reality of sickness or old age constantly reminds us that we are fragile and mortal beings; and that,

⁷⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1421.

no matter how advanced technology is, the frailty of human beings and their mortality is something that will never leave us. Therefore, compassion for the sick/weak will always be called for. This section of this paper will highlight the value of the Anointing of the Sick, one of the least remembered sacraments, but a Sacrament that in a special way reflects the infinite compassion of the Lord Jesus for the sick, the elderly and the dying.

The Gospels are full of moving passages in which we see Jesus spending endless hours curing and caring for the sick and suffering in each town, in each public meeting. Therefore the exercise of this Sacrament is a direct continuation of the very ministry of Jesus of caring for the sick as we read in *The Rites*:

The Sacrament of Anointing prolongs the concerns which the Lord himself showed for the bodily and spiritual welfare for the sick, as the Gospels testify, and which he asked his followers to show also. This Sacrament has its beginning in Christ and is spoken of in the letter of James ...⁷⁸

The Decree by The Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship on Anointing and Care of the Sick begins thus:

When the Church cares for the sick, it serves Christ himself in the suffering members of this mystical body. When it follows the example of the Lord Jesus, who “went about doing good and healing” (Acts 10:38), the Church obeys his command to cure the sick (see Mk 16:18).⁷⁹

After his resurrection, one of the mandates Jesus gave to his disciples was to cast out demons and heal the sick:

- 15 And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.
- 16 The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.
- 17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name ...
- 18 ... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” (Mk 16:15-18)

⁷⁸ *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, “Anointing and Care of the Sick”, 5.

⁷⁹ Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*, 7 December 1979.

Following these instructions of Christ her Spouse, who gave her power to “bind and loose”, the Church has always shown a particular concern for the sick since the earliest days. The first action of Peter and John after Pentecost was to heal a crippled man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple in the name of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 3:1-10). Over the centuries, many mission hospitals have been built to care for the sick, hospital ministries and chaplaincies are no less in number and Religious Congregations have been founded which are directly concerned with caring for the sick, for example, the Camillians, and pastoral care of the sick is a major duty of every ordained minister in the Church.

The Church is therefore really trying to be in the forefront in her ministry to the sick. According to a recent *Tablet* magazine, “the Catholic Church, through its mission hospitals and pastoral care, has been ministering at grassroots level and is involved in providing 26.7 percent of the total care given to people living with HIV/Aids in Africa.”⁸⁰ This is especially encouraging, given that HIV/Aids is one of the greatest scourges of humanity in the present age, especially here in Africa.

Above all, the Church offers to the sick the Sacrament of Anointing, which is a more direct and intense inward touch, giving them spiritual, physical and psychological strength and nourishment, and a deeper consolation, hope and understanding of the meaning of their sickness. What this paper may recommend here is, instead of doing the Anointing just as a mere sacramental ritual, it is also important that the minister be fully present to the sick person(s) and give them encouragement and hope, and show them that they are loved by God and the Church. This is especially important for those who suffer from stigmatizing illnesses like HIV/Aids.

⁸⁰ R. IGO, “Hope out of Africa”, in *The Tablet*, 10 October 2009, 6.

4.2.2 Compassion through the Sacrament of Penance

While Jesus' concern for the sick was legendary, his compassion pointed to a deeper concern, namely, the healing of the soul, one's relationship with God. This is especially shown when Jesus heals the paralytic. Before Jesus heals his bodily paralysis, he heals his spiritual paralysis: "Your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5). The worst form of illness is sickness of the soul, the sickness that keeps us disconnected from God, the sickness that causes us to think that God has abandoned us.

However, the Church supplies us with means of healing from this kind of sickness through the Sacrament of reconciliation, whereby we are reconciled with ourselves, with the community/Church and with God.⁸¹ Compassion is at the heart of forgiveness as we saw earlier on, and so, the penitent who comes to receive this Sacrament should be made to experience God's loving mercy and compassion.

The *Roman Ritual* lists four parts of this Sacrament, namely the contrition, the confession, the satisfaction and the absolution.⁸² The confession itself is a very important moment in this Sacrament, because it is at this moment the penitent opens his heart to the minister of God, and the minister, by means of a spiritual judgment, pronounces his decision of forgiveness or retention of sins.⁸³ It is at this point that the mercy of God and his compassion for the sinner should be experienced.

The key to communicating this compassion lies with the minister here, the one who decides to pronounce forgiveness or otherwise. More often than not, the minister pronounces forgiveness. But abuses of this Sacrament are bound to happen, so that the minister scolds the penitent instead of communicating empathy and encouragement to

⁸¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1468-70.

⁸² Cf. *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, "Penance", 6.

⁸³ Cf. *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, "Penance", 6b.

reform. In such a situation, the penitent may leave the confessional feeling more hurt than healed, even if the spiritual absolution has been given.

We must realize that besides the spiritual corruption, sin also has other effects, especially psychological. People may think themselves worthless for having committed some sins, and may continue to feel guilty, even long after this Sacrament has been received. Therefore, the minister sitting in the confessional, dispensing forgiveness on behalf of God, should consider this and offer holistic healing. Although, many a time pastoral situations do not allow much time between the penitent and the minister, in cases where it is possible, the minister should take time and offer psychological comfort and healing to the penitent.⁸⁴

The penitent who makes a return journey, like the Prodigal Son, must feel welcome back and that his guilt is healed. Compassion must be expressed to him, though his sins be as red as scarlet, and be made to see that it is possible to reform and to live meaningful life.

4.3 Compassion expressed through the Teaching/Pastoral Office of the Church

In chapter two of this essay, we saw how Jesus was moved with compassion for the crowds. First he was moved with compassion for them because they were harassed and scattered like sheep without a shepherd, after which he taught them many things (Mk 6:34). Mark does not tell us what Jesus taught the crowds, but just that he taught them

⁸⁴ In cases whereby a penitent has a regular confessor, the confessor could do well in successive moments of the reception of this Sacrament to strengthen the weaknesses of the penitent to come out of a certain habit that may seem resistant, instead of scolding them of repeating the same sins.

many things. Jesus left his teaching authority with the apostles who in turn handed it down to their successors, the bishops. Today, it is bishops who are entrusted with the spiritual care of the people, assisted by priests, deacons and other people in different ministries of the Church.

Through this office of the bishops, the Church should communicate mercy and compassion to the people. She should be a true shepherd. One way in which through her teaching the Church has communicated compassion is through the social teaching of the Church, which serves to protect the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized and voiceless individuals in the society. The key themes of the social teaching of the Church include the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person, call to family, life and participation, rights and responsibilities, preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, solidarity and care for God's creation.⁸⁵ There are many Papal Encyclicals and Church documents in which such themes have been explicated, right from the *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Pope Leo XIII to the most recent one, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) of Pope Benedict XVI.⁸⁶

At an international level of implementation of the social teaching of the Church, the Holy See has different organs that work to ensure that the teaching is followed. Some of these organs include the *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace* and the *Caritas International* among others.

⁸⁵ See the "Catholic Social Teaching", from Wikipedia; The Free Encyclopedia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_social_teaching 8/11/09.

⁸⁶ Other Papal Encyclicals and Church Documents on the social teaching of the Church include the *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Humanae Vitae* (1968), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) and *Deus Caritas Est* (2005).

At an intermediate level, the Church should act as a watchdog in various jurisdictions, and be the mouthpiece for the people who cannot speak for themselves against political and social structures or ideologies that are oppressive. For example: in Kenya, one of the debates that has refused to go away is the issue of huge salaries for Members of Parliament. The poor people of Kenya, even the sick, are under a heavy burden of taxes to support such governmental extravagant lifestyles. In so far as we know, the Church has not done much to challenge that. The idea here is not that the Church should become politically proactive, but that she has a role to play in addressing the plight of the poor and other marginalized groups in the society. Jesus quite openly challenged the political system of his day, for example, the Jewish leaders who hypocritically said long prayers while they devoured houses of widows (cf. Lk 20:47).

At lower levels, there are quite a number of Church facilities that care for less fortunate people, such as homes for the disabled, where they can be treated with proper human dignity; rehabilitation and relief centers for street families; rescue centers for domestic abuse victims; homes for the aged; and so on. There is, however, need for more pastoral care for people that even the Church herself seems to neglect. If Jesus was walking the streets of Nairobi today, for example, how would he treat commercial sex workers, single mothers,⁸⁷ homosexuals, people infected with HIV/AIDS, and other seemingly ostracized groups of people? Probably these are the people that would arouse

⁸⁷ It is a common practice in many dioceses of Kenya, for example, not to baptize children of single mothers. Well, perhaps the Church has good reasons for this, but, one cannot fail to wonder; if Jesus was here now, would he refuse baptism to such innocent little ones, he who said that little children should be let to go to him (Cf. Mt 19:14)? One young single mother reported this incidence: "When I presented my child for baptism, Rev. Father demanded to know the child's father and in the assembly ... he shouted at me ... [he] finally baptized my child with a lot of hesitancy and much reluctance." Find full story in P. N. WACHEGE, *African Single Mothers: Socio-Ethical and Religious Investigations*, 143-144. Could not the Church have had a little more compassion and understanding for her, she who presented her little one to Jesus?

Jesus' compassion at the deepest level. And yet, these are some of the people the Church seems to shy away from.

The Church ministers may need to show more compassion to people they minister to. One way of communicating compassion to people at lower levels is through preaching. Through preaching, the message of consolation, and the mercy and love of God should be preached to the people. Often times, many homilies we hear in our Churches take the form of condemnation for the people for various failures and sins. We, however, did not see Jesus condemn people when they earnestly approached him.⁸⁸ In the same way, preaching in Christian gatherings and Churches should communicate God's compassion, love and care for the people. People are already hurting with many things in the world, and many turn to the Church for healing and consolation, only to be hurt more by condemnation preaching. When Jesus saw the crowds looking harassed, he had compassion on them, and taught them many things. The Church should follow suit.

4.4 Compassion in the Christian Life

All who have been baptized and incorporated into the Body of Christ are the Church. Therefore, all Christians are called to a life of compassion. Most of the acts of compassion we saw in chapter one and two flowed from Jesus himself, and although many Christians may think that only God could do that, nevertheless there should be an endeavor to imitate Christ, since they have become members of his Body.

Looking at the acts of compassion in chapter three, we saw these were acts done by rather ordinary people: a journeying Samaritan, a father who lost a son and a master

⁸⁸ We can think of the woman caught in adultery and brought to Jesus for a ruling. But he said to her, "Neither do I condemn you." (Cf. Jn 8:1-11). This is a perfect example of what attitude Church ministers should have toward sinners.

who forgave his servant. If we are to take these people to represent different categories of people in the Christian population, then Christians are called to live the same compassion. These three characters represent different relations that Christians find themselves in. The compassionate father represents compassion in family relationships, the forgiving master represents compassion in work (employer-employee) relationships and the good Samaritan represents compassion to people we meet who are not closely related to us, who may even be enemies.

The compassionate father may be taken to represent our family relationships and how we should show compassion to one another in our families. Parents should be compassionate to their children, show them love and care and correct them lovingly when they err. As a popular English saying goes, *charity begins at home*: it might be equally true to say that compassion begins at home. For if we do not exercise compassion with the people we live with, how are we to even think of it with strangers? Or are we to be saints in the market place and devils in our own homes/communities? God would not approve of that. Today, there are many families that are broken or dysfunctional because the members do not show compassionate love to one another. If such families can look upon the example of the compassionate father who forgave his lost son and welcomed him home, they may enjoy the spice of a happier life.

Christians also find themselves in different working relationships, and therefore either masters or servants. The parable of the compassionate master should especially inspire us here. Although we would think, technically speaking, that in its best expression this parable expresses the extravagant grace of our God to us, nevertheless there is another lesson to borrow from it. For those of us who are in positions of authority, we

should look upon our subjects with an eye of compassion. This compassion may take many forms, for example, giving fair wages to our workers or improving their working conditions and terms of employment. Also, those who are in leadership positions should not lead with an iron rod, but rather listen to the concerns of their subjects in just the same way the compassionate master listened to his servant. This also relates closely to the social teaching of the Church.

In living this life as Christians, we do not always find ourselves in relations that we are familiar with, like family, work and friends. Sometimes we find ourselves relating to people we have not known, or people we have been on bad terms with. Here, the Good Samaritan parable helps us to see that even those people need care from us when it is called for. This should ring even louder bells to the Christian because helping our enemies or strangers is one of the greatest Christian virtues and a criterion of the last judgment (Cf. Mt 25:32-46). Our compassion for people who are otherwise distant from us need not always call for drastic measures as it did in the case of the Samaritan. It may involve just little things. The size does not matter so long as they are done out of love. It could be a courtesy call to a children's home or home for the elderly, a helping hand in a hospital, giving direction to a person who has missed his way to an office, dropping a penny in the charity box to help a needy child somewhere, and so on. All these are acts of compassion so long as they are done out of love and not for show off. Remember as we have seen above, the Samaritan used only two dinarii on the beaten person, but as long as he did it out his own heart and charitable concern, he did something that was great. And this should also be the case with us as Christians.

4.5 Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, we should note that there are a myriad ways in which the Church can, and actually should, express her compassion to the people she comes and ministers to. However, for brevity's sake we have seen just a few of those ways. First, since many of the acts of compassion in the Gospels were connected with healings, we have seen here how the Church can show her compassionate heart to the sick. We have seen that in this regard, the Church has really tried over the time to be close to the sick and the suffering, not just in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, but also through physical healthcare. Closely connected with the Anointing of the Sick as a Sacrament of Healing is also the Sacrament of Penance, in which, as we have seen, God's mercy and compassion are communicated to the penitent who turns to God.

We have also seen that the Church can show compassion to the poor, the marginalized, and the voiceless by promoting her social doctrine. She should be the conscience of the society against oppressive structures in the same way that Jesus was. And when she preaches the word of God to the people, she should be able to communicate love and compassion, but not threat, condemnation or the infliction of fear and guilt. Even these should be used only as a very last resort for the conversion of stubborn sinners. And the motive should still be compassionate love.

Finally, all Christians are called to live the compassionate life, at home, in work and in other places, mirroring Christ, the compassion of God.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

As we bring this work to an end, it is good to briefly underscore the mood of the foregoing pages. This work has made an exposition of the acts of compassion in the Synoptic Gospels, with some short references to John's gospel. We have made an explication of the instances in which the word *splagx nizomai* which is translated compassion, occurs in the Synoptic Gospels. We have found it difficult to translate *splangx nizomai* adequately, but generally speaking it conveys a deep yearning, a strong emotion as from the 'guts' or the innards, that moves the whole of one's being toward the plight of another and reaches unto them.

Now, although this word is not used many times even by the evangelists as we have seen, yet it may be taken as a clue to the Jesus' whole life. If we would sum up the whole character of Christ in reference to ourselves, it might be gathered into this one sentence, "He was moved with compassion." As we have seen in the essay, Jesus compassion was not a merely occasional attitude in his life, but one that shaped his entire life and mission.

We have seen also that compassion operates in a way that is rather hard to control. For example, when Jesus was moved with compassion for the people, he would go as far as to breach the law to reach the person, like touching lepers and corpses, acts which were unthinkable at that time. The compassion of the Samaritan made him minister to an adversary, and the compassion of the king made him cancel a huge debt. The compassion of the father to the lost son made him run madly to welcome him, even after squandered his property recklessly, and he kissed him. So, what is this compassion really? Here,

Matthew Fox's description of what compassion can do may lessen our wonder. He describes compassion as a kind of fire that disturbs, surprises, ignites, burns, sears, and warms. He says that "Compassion incinerates denial; it especially warms and melts cold hearts, cold structures, frozen minds and self-satisfied lifestyles. Those who are touched by compassion have their lives turned upside down."⁸⁹ And when we reflect on the acts of compassion that we have seen in the first three chapters of this essay, surely that is what compassion is and can do.

Finally, we have seen how the Church carries on the compassion of her Bridegroom toward the people of today. Although we have looked at just few examples of how the Church can exercise compassion, namely through the Sacraments of Healing and the pastoral office, we must realize that, as Rich Heffern puts it, all "Ministry in the church is applied compassion. [It] describes the ways we all find to reach out to others, to take that fire that has been kindled in our hearts and souls and ignite a kindred spark in others."⁹⁰ And so, the whole life of the church should be patterned through compassion. Indeed, the whole of Christian life should be a life of compassion, and all Christians should strive to be compassionate, just as our Heavenly Father is himself compassionate (Cf. Lk 6:36).

⁸⁹ M. FOX, *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*, 57.

⁹⁰ R. HEFFERN, "Kindling the fire of compassion" *The National Catholic Reporter*, 20/9/2002, 11.

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