

Holy Spirit Province

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IMITATING THE COMPASSION OF JESUS: 14TH SUNDAY A

One of the most wonderful things about the person of Jesus, has been and continues to be, his special love for ordinary people, for people like us. It comes out in two beautiful statements that he makes in the gospel today. The first is in his prayer to God: 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children.' The second is in his Invitation: 'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.'

What leads him to make these statements? He has just completed a tour of the towns and villages of Galilee. In each of them he has been preaching that God is King of the world, and so people must know, love and serve God as the Lord and Ruler of their lives. On many occasions too, he has made the kingdom of God happen, by curing sick people and setting them free from their handicaps and disabilities. But it's only the ordinary, everyday people who have appreciated his efforts, accepted his message and started to follow him. The educated and the clever have simply closed their minds and hearts to his message and walked away with their noses in the air.

For the sake of understanding and developing our own personal relationship with Christ, it will be worth delving into his relationship with the ones Jesus often referred to as 'the poor' and 'the little ones'. They are the same ones whom the high and mighty Pharisees called 'sinners' or 'the rabble who know nothing of the law'. Today we might refer to them as 'the oppressed', 'the outsiders', or 'the strugglers'.

In the gospels, the term 'poor' does not refer only to those who are economically deprived, even though it does include them. In the first place, they were those who had to beg for a living. Beggars included those sick and disabled persons who were not well enough to work and who had no relative to support them. Of course, in that society there were no hospitals, no pensions, and no emergency payments. The blind, the deaf and dumb, the lame, the cripples, and the lepers, then, were generally beggars.

The economically poor included the day-labourers who were often without work, the peasants who worked on the farms of wealthy landowners, and those who were slaves. Then there were the widows and the orphans, who had no way of earning a living and no one to provide for them. They were dependent on occasional handouts from the Temple treasury.

On the whole, the suffering of the poor was not destitution and starvation except during a war or famine. They were sometimes hungry and thirsty, but unlike millions today, they seldom starved. Their principal suffering was the embarrassment and shame that went with being totally dependent upon others. As the steward in the parable says: 'I would be too ashamed to beg' (Lk 16:3). They found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, with no prestige, no power, and no respect. They were social outcasts and left to feel that their lives were without dignity, meaningless, helpless and hopeless.

People of the middle class (the educated and the law-abiding, such as the scribes and Pharisees), treated them as low-class scum, and called them 'sinners'. The educated ones, those who knew the Scriptures backwards, put the label 'sinners' too, on any who had sinful or unclean professions, e.g. prostitutes, tax collectors, robbers, herdsmen or gamblers. Others called 'sinners' included those who did not pay their tithes (one tenth of their income) to the priests, those who did not rest on the sabbath (the Jewish Saturday), and those who were careless about keeping the laws and customs concerning foods and ritual purity. So, these so-called 'sinners' felt terrible frustration, shame, guilt, anxiety and misery. They did not even have the consolation of feeling that they were in God's good books. The educated ones, those who 'ought to know', kept telling them that they were displeasing to God.

But Jesus was different, strikingly different. As a carpenter, he was from the middle class himself and not one of the poor and oppressed. But he mixed socially with even the poorest of the poor. He even got the nick-name 'the friend of sinners'. In a nutshell Jesus became an outcast by choice.

Why did he do this? What would make a middle-class man talk to beggars and mix socially with the poor? What would make a man who was a prophet, a spokesperson for God, mix with those who neither knew the fine print of the law nor kept it? The answer comes across very clearly in the gospels: COMPASSION!

Over and over again the gospels say this kind of thing: 'When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick' (Mt 14:14). 'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Mt 9:36). The plight and tears of the widow of Nain touched his heart to the core: 'Don't cry,' he says to her, before bringing her son back to life (Lk7:13-15). He was moved with compassion at the plight of a leper begging for help (Mk 4:41), for two blind men sitting at the side of a road begging (Mt 20:30-34), and for a crowd of people with nothing to eat (Mk 8:2 par). In each case he responds to their sufferings with the power and love, the compassion and care of God.

All through the gospels, even when the word is not used, we sense the surge of compassion rising in the heart of Jesus. 'Don't cry,' he says, 'Don't worry', 'Don't be afraid' (e.g. Mk5:36; 6:50; Mt 6:25-34). He was not moved by the grandeur and beauty of the great Temple buildings (Mk 13:1-2), but by the generosity of a poor widow who put her last cent into the Temple treasury (Mk 12:41-44). When everyone else around him was jumping for joy at the

raising of Jairus's daughter to life, Jesus was concerned that she should be given something to eat (Mk 5:42-43).

His compassion was the most human and humane thing about Jesus. It's the most human and humane thing about us as well. The Australian poet Adam Lindsay Gordon once wrote: 'Life is mostly froth and bubble. Two things stand like stone, kindness in another's trouble, courage in our own!' So, whose side are we on? On the side of Jesus, the side of compassion, kindness, help, healing, and mercy? Or on the side of the scribes and Pharisees of this world - fierce, fault-finding, harsh, critical, and merciless? Will we take our cue from their cruel, harsh, and insensitive judgments of others? Or will we take our inspiration from what we have seen in Jesus, and from the Invitation he reissues to us today: 'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest?'

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