

The Difference Jesus Makes: Charity/Compassion

In several places in the gospels the word “compassion” is used to describe the reason for Jesus’ actions. For example:

When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick (14:14)

A man with leprosy came to Him and begged Him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” He said. “Be clean.”

(Mark 1:40,41)

Jesus had compassion on the blind men outside Jericho, on the crowds who hadn’t eaten for three days, and He used the word to describe the father’s response to the prodigal son. He also taught that our compassionate response to others would be judged as something kind we had done for Him:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Jesus also taught compassion in a very direct way through the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus had affirmed an expert in the law for his good answer to his own question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asked him a question, “What do you think the Law says on this?” “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself,” the man replied, but then added another question, “Who is my neighbour?”

Jesus answered by telling a story about a man who was on his way to Jericho when he was robbed and beaten by thieves. A priest and a Levite, traveling that same route, saw the wounded man and passed him by, but a Samaritan came along who bound his wounds, put him on his donkey and took him to an inn. There he took care of the man and then paid the innkeeper in advance for continuing the man’s care. Then Jesus asked another question: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The man replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” And then, Jesus answered his initial question, “Who is my neighbor?” by saying “Go and do likewise.”

Compassion was a new and radical development that came in the person of Jesus. We had seen it in the Old Testament, particularly when God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34 and as the prophets and others later reflected back on that description of God’s nature: “I am Yahweh, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, etc.” But the world hadn’t seen a people committed to compassionate ministry until Jesus and His followers broke the mold.

To understand what affect the church had on the world of its day, it's important for us to understand two concepts that were prevalent in the world in which it began: the words "charity" and "compassion".

There were two kinds of charity that one could be involved in and the words to describe these two were *liberalitas* and *caritas*. The first describes the kind of charity that was practiced by the Romans which involved making some kind of gift that would please the recipient who would then be likely to, in some way or other, return the favour. It was like modern corporations giving a large political gift in advance of an election: it was hardly charity as we understand it, but more like buying a favour. Most, or all, of this charitable giving went to people who didn't really need it, the most honourable in society.

The word *caritas* was used to describe giving to alleviate suffering without expectation of anything coming back and that's how the Christians gave.

Tertullian, who lived and wrote in North Africa at the end of the second century tells us that the early Christians had a common fund to which they gave voluntarily. This fund supported widows, the physically disabled, needy orphans, the sick, prisoners who were in bonds because of their Christian faith and teachers requiring help. It was used to provide burials for the poor and sometimes for the purchase of freedom for slaves. Christopher Dawson writes about the early church, "Every church had its *matriculum*, or list of persons in receipt of relief, and enormous sums were spent in every kind of charitable work." The 19th century Irish historian W.E.H. Lecky says that every Christian was expected to give 10% of his income to charity. Despite this expectation, there was no coercion, no pressure, but giving was completely voluntary. One of the reasons we have an offering box on our Information Table and don't come around with a plate or make emotional appeals regarding finances is that our desire is that you would enjoy freedom in giving -- it's more joyful that way -- and my hope would be that giving becomes an issue that you work out between you and God instead of something you feel pressured, even manipulated, to do. There is great blessing in giving if it's done with the right motivation and in freedom -- that's what the early church experienced.

A late first-century Christian document called the *Didache*, or *The Teaching*, encouraged Christian charity by saying, "Give to everyone who asks thee, and do not refuse", and the second-century epistle called *The Shepherd of Hermas* includes these words: "Give simply to all without asking doubtfully to whom thou givest, but give to all." Giving to all often meant bringing food to Christians who were in prison, even though there was some danger in doing so.

So, the first word was charity, and now the second big word for today: compassion. We've seen how Christians and Romans differed in their understanding of charity, but what about compassion? Here the difference is even more stark. The Greeks and Romans were fully in line with their philosophers who, like Plato, felt that compassion towards the weak was a waste of time. Plato, in his *The Republic* said that a poor

man, usually a slave, who was no longer able to work because of sickness should be left to die. The Roman philosopher Plautus (254-184 BC) argued, "You do a beggar bad service by giving him food and drink; you lose what you give and prolong his life for more misery." When plague struck the city of Athens during the Peloponnesian War in 430 BC the sick and dying were abandoned by their neighbours and family members who were afraid that they, too, might catch the plague. Nearly 800 years later, the Romans fled in panic from a contagious plague in Alexandria, Egypt, leaving their friends and next of kin. The Roman Emperor at the time was Julian the Apostate, a man who detested Christians. He lamented that the Christians showed love and compassion whereas his pagan countrymen did not. He said, "The impious Galileans relieve both their own poor and ours. It is shameful that ours should be so destitute of our assistance."

Life was hard. People seemed to think nothing of seeing a gladiator killed in the arena for sport, and emperors could and did kill many for frivolous reasons, including for their own entertainment. In other words, compassion was not on the list of Roman virtues . . . at least not until the Christian church put it there.

Now we move forward through the ages to see what this gift of compassion, that Jesus gave as an example to His followers, has meant for the world. And I'm going to talk about two kinds of compassionate ministry that have been started by Christians - the care for orphans and care for the sick. I think when we get to the end of this session we'll see that, without Christian influence, this world would have been a much more frightening place for many.

We saw earlier that Christians in the Roman Empire rescued abandoned babies and raised them as their own. It was a harsh reality that life expectancy was relatively short during the centuries following the birth of Christ. Statistics on life expectancy in ancient times are strongly influenced by a high rate of infant mortality. Including that infant mortality rate of over 30%, a Roman person's life expectancy was probably in the mid-twenties, but if a person were to live past the age of five, he or she could expect to live well into their thirties and possibly even 40's. With people marrying in their mid-teens and living into their twenties and thirties, there were many orphans.

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote in his New Testament epistle, "*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.*" (Jas. 1:27) Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century wrote that collections were taken during church services to help the orphans and Tertullian, maybe fifty years later reported that the church in Carthage, Africa, had a common treasury, "to aid the boys and girls who have neither fortune nor parents."

Before Christianity became legal in 313 A.D., orphans were often taken into family homes and raised there. After 313, there were two additional ministries to orphans, homes that were established for child orphans and other homes established for infants who had been orphaned. As early as the fourth century, church leaders were urging the congregations to build homes for orphans and by the Middle Ages,

societies had been formed which provided shelter for both abandoned and orphaned children. One such society was called the "Order of the Holy Ghost" and it was responsible for operating more than 800 houses for orphans by the end of the thirteenth century. In addition, many monasteries took in orphans and provided for them during the Middle Ages.

One of the most famous Christians in providing care for children without their parents was George Muller who came to faith while in university and who, in 1836, founded a home in Bristol for 30 orphaned girls, who were given both a home and an education. At his death in 1898, more than 8,000 children were being cared for and educated in numerous orphanages that he had helped to establish.

There were two other Christian inventions that helped orphan children. One was the requirement that children being baptized would have "godparents", a couple who would take that child into their home in case of the death of the child's parents. The second was the founding of an organization called the "Children's Aid Society" by an American minister in 1853. This organization arranged for vagrants -- orphaned children living on the streets -- to spend time living with a farming family, experiencing life in a hard-working, disciplined and healthy environment. And so the "orphan trains" carried hundreds of children to a new and healthier experience of life.

Just before we go on to look at the advent of Christian health care, including nursing and hospitals, let me give a list of means of showing compassion that followers of Jesus originated:

- created a diaconia to care for widows (Acts 6)
- developed a church list of needy persons
- established common treasuries from which to provide aid to the needy
- formed voluntary associations to aid the unfortunate (from first century until present day)
- provided for orphans
- introduced homes for the mentally ill (first in 321)
- the first institutions to care only for the sick (4th C)
- *Xenodochia* - buildings that housed strangers, travellers and the sick, late 4th century)
- began institutions for the poor (4th century)
- institutions for the aged (5th century)
- institutions for the blind (630 AD, Jerusalem)

In one of the first passages we read today we heard Jesus say, "I was sick and you looked after me", referring to what His followers would do for people He called "the least of these". It's interesting that He didn't say, "I was sick and you healed me," even though that would have been a very good thing and has happened often throughout the course of history. No, Jesus is referring here to the care we offer those who are sick and He says that, to the extent that we offer that care to the "least of these", we're doing it for Him.

Dionysius was the bishop of Alexandria during the third century and he wrote this of the pagan culture around him:

They thrust aside anyone who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied and treated them with utter contempt when they died.
(Works, Epistle 12.5)

This is what he wrote about the Christians of his day:

Very many of our brethren, while in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness, did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril, and ministered to them . . . drawing upon themselves their neighbours' diseases, and willingly taking over to their own persons the sufferings of those around them. (12.4)

There were no hospitals, no nursing stations, no clinics. There was a belief that you could visit the shrine of the Greek god of healing, Aesculapius, and he would visit you in a dream and tell you how to treat your illness, but you couldn't get treatment at that shrine. The only evidence we have of anything like a hospital are a few places where soldiers were treated for their injuries suffered in battle.

While the church was persecuted, the most they could do for the sick was to take them into their homes and to care for them there, but starting in the fourth century, they began to build hospitals. The word "hospital" comes from "hospitality" because these first hospitals were open to the sick, to the poor and to pilgrims. The Christian hospitals were the world's first voluntary charitable institutions and they were built all over Europe and in England, and were copied by the Muslim Arabs in North Africa and the Middle East who were impressed by the humanitarian work carried out in Christian hospitals.

By the 14th century, England, with a population of less than 4 million people, had 600 hospitals and they were often referred to as "God's House". At the same time, there were many small hospitals being established in German towns and they were each called "House of the Holy Spirit".

Who staffed the early hospitals? There is very little evidence, but what we have indicates that deaconesses, widows and unmarried women served as nurses. By the middle ages the work was carried out by monks and by nuns.

The next leap forward in caring for the sick came as a result of the work of Theodor Fliedner, a Lutheran pastor in Kaiserswerth, Germany. He began by caring for one destitute prisoner in 1833 and his work grew into a hospital with 100 beds. He founded a Lutheran deaconesses order, comprised mostly of peasant women, whom he trained as nurses. A young woman named Florence Nightingale heard about, then visited this hospital and, although strongly opposed by her parents, decided to dedicate her life to nursing. She went to Crimea in 1854 to nurse British soldiers wounded in the Crimean War.

After returning, she founded a school of nursing at St. Thomas hospital in London. Her life was committed to the truth of her own words: "The Kingdom of heaven is within, but we must also make it so without."

In 1864 Jean Henri Dunant, after witnessing the suffering of soldiers in Italy's struggle for unification, founded the International Red Cross. In 1901 he became the first person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He spoke these words from his deathbed in 1910: "I am a disciple of Christ as in the first century, and nothing more."

Now, no one can answer the question, "What would have happened, if there had been no Christian compassionate mission to the poor, the handicapped, the sick and the sojourner?" We can only say what did happen, and that is that Christian compassion revolutionized the world, made it a safer and kinder place to live and showed people how to take care of those in need.

What do we learn?

1. That love is costly. From the collections taken for the poor in the early church to the building and staffing of hospitals, there has always been a high cost to following Jesus in compassion -- but Christians have paid the price because we are followers of Jesus. He leads. He gave. He sacrificed. He loved. We follow.
2. Governments have taken over the role of public benefactor, with social welfare, with medical care, with education, and many other areas. A great challenge for the Christian church in the years ahead will be to see needs and meet them before the world has time to react.
3. We learn that great things can be accomplished by those who take seriously the call of Jesus to follow Him. It may be Florence Nightingale wanting to make the Kingdom of Heaven visible to others, or Dunant simply being a Christ-follower. Begin by showing compassion where you can.