

7 March – the 3rd Sunday in Lent

JESUS: THE MAN OF COMPASSION (Mat 14:13-14, Luke 7:11-17)

1 The compassion of Jesus

In this session, we shall look at examples in the Gospels of Jesus' heart of compassion as well as reflecting on what this means for us in our lives today. We shall see his life on earth proves his heart.

- **Mat 8:2-3** The word 'will' in both the leper's request and Jesus' reply is the word for 'wish' or 'desire'. The leper was asking about Jesus' deepest desire. And Jesus revealed his deepest desire by healing him.
- **Mat 9:2** 'When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic...'. *'Before they could open their mouths to ask for help, Jesus couldn't stop himself – words of reassurance and calm tumbled out'* (p.26).
- Seeing the helplessness and needs of individuals and groups ignites Jesus' **compassion**. These references all mention Jesus' compassion – **Mat 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; Mk 6:34; Lk 7:13**.
- Compassion refers *literally to the bowels or guts of a person – an ancient way of referring to what rises up from one's innermost core*. This reflects the deepest heart of Christ.
- Twice we are told Jesus wept (**Lk 19:41; Jn 11:35**). *His deepest anguish is the anguish of others. What drew his heart out to the point of tears? The tears of others.* (p.26).

2 To whom does Jesus most naturally gravitate?

'Time and again it is the morally disgusting, the socially reviled, the inexcusable and underserving ... He is, by his enemies' testimony, the "friend of sinners" (Lk 7:34).' (p.27)

3 What stands out about Jesus in the Gospels as a whole?

'The dominant note left ringing in our ears after reading the Gospels, the most vivid and arresting element of the portrait, is the way the Holy Son of God moves toward, touches, heals, embraces, and forgives those who least deserve it yet truly desire it. ... The Jesus given to us in the Gospels is not simply one who loves, but one who is love; merciful affections stream from his innermost heart as rays from the sun.' (p.27)

'It is impossible for the affectionate heart of Christ to be overcelebrated, made too much of, exaggerated. It cannot be plumbed. But it is easily neglected, forgotten. We draw too little strength from it.' (p.29)

4 Jesus' deepest impulse

What we are saying is deeper than saying that Jesus is loving or merciful or gracious. The sum of all four Gospels is that *'when Jesus sees the fallenness of the world all about him, his deepest impulse, his most natural instinct, is to move toward that sin and suffering, not away from it.'* (p.30).

5 Jesus reverses the Old Testament system

Consider the Old Testament categories of 'clean' and 'unclean', which usually refer to moral purity. The problem was guilt (Lev 5:3) for which offering a sacrifice was needed (Lev 5:6). A striking part of this system was that when an unclean person came into contact with a clean person, that clean person then became unclean. Moral dirtiness was contagious.

Jesus was the cleanest person ever to walk this earth. *'We cannot fathom the sheer purity, holiness, cleanness, of his mind and heart.'*

The simplicity, the loveliness' (p.30). Yet what did he do when he saw the unclean, when he saw prostitutes and lepers? He moved towards them. He touched them and spent time with them. It was more than a touch of compassion. Jesus was reversing the Jewish system. *'When Jesus, the Clean One, touched an unclean sinner, Christ did not become unclean. The sinner became clean'* (p.31). Jesus gave back to undeserving sinners their humanity as it was meant to be.

Jesus is compassion clothed in a human body. Wherever he went, *'he spread the good contagion of his cleansing mercy. "Christ is love covered over in flesh."*' (p.32)

6 How does this relate to us today?

Remember Hebrews 13:8! The Jesus who wept at the tomb of Lazarus weeps with us in our lonely despair. The Jesus who touched lepers puts his arm around us today when we feel misunderstood and lonely. *'The Jesus who reached out and cleansed messy sinners reaches into our souls and answers our half-hearted pleas for mercy with the mighty invincible cleansing of one who cannot bear to do otherwise.'* (p.32)

The New Testament teaches that a believer is united to Christ, *'a union so intimate that whatever our own body parts do, Christ's body can be said to do (1 Cor 6:15-16)'*.

'Jesus is closer to you today than he was to the sinners and sufferers he spoke with and touched in his earthly ministry. Through his Spirit, Christ's own heart envelops his people with an embrace nearer and tighter than any physical embrace could ever achieve. His actions on earth in a body reflected his heart; the same heart now acts in the same ways towards us, for WE are now his body.' (p.33)

Discussion Questions

1. What was it that stirred Jesus' heart in the situations described in these passages: Mat 9:35-38; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:40-42; Luke 7:11-17.
Are there other incidents in the Gospels in which you think Jesus acted or spoke with compassion?
2. What strikes you most about Jesus' ministry in the Gospels and why?
3. Do you think we can neglect or even forget about the affectionate heart of Jesus?
4. Jesus' compassion extended to those who were sinners, and his opponents branded him as 'a friend of sinners'. Can you think of occasions in the gospels when he befriended people who were very clearly sinful?
5. What does Christ's compassion look like in your own life?
How may we know more of this compassion?
What encourages you to focus on this and share it with others?
6. If Jesus walked among us today, who are some of the morally or physically repulsive people we would find him reaching out to?
Where would we be in the crowds – at his feet or watching him with disapproval or suspicion?

These studies are based on the book *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund.