

Eleventh Sunday *per annum*
Year A, 2026

Ex 19:2-6a
Ps 100

Rom 5:6-11
Mt 9:36-10:8

God's compassion

In our contemporary culture, where the influence of Christianity is waning, if you were to ask a more or less secular person, someone who might be described as a non-practicing Christian or even as post-Christian, what compassion is and where compassion is best exemplified, they'd likely mention Buddhism, which, to be sure, holds compassion in very high regard and places it at the center of much of Buddhist thought and practice. For many people in our increasingly post-Christian culture, compassion is associated with Buddhism, while Christianity is seen as focusing on sin and judgment. If this is so, then it would probably surprise such people, and perhaps even many Christians, to learn that compassion is one of the hallmark characteristics of God, as described in both the Old and New Testaments.

Let's take, for instance, the opening line in today's gospel passage from Matthew: "*At the sight of the crowds, Jesus' heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.*" The expression "to move one's heart with pity" is actually a really good, if somewhat wordy rendering of the Greek verb ... are you ready for it? ... *splagchnizomai*. The *splangchna* are the innards: the heart, lungs, liver, spleen, kidneys – the nobler organs – that were thought to be the seat of human

feeling and emotion. When Jesus saw the crowds, their plight caused him to experience a visceral reaction within his *splanchna*, a powerful emotional response that seized him from within. He felt it in his “guts” we might say – or more literally and poetically, his *heart* was moved with pity, compassion. Most other English translations simply say that Jesus “felt compassion” or “was moved with compassion.” So we’re clearly talking about compassion.

This Greek word for compassion is used eight times in the Gospels to describe Jesus himself (Mt 9:36; 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mk 1:41, 6:34, 8:2; Lk 7:13). What’s more, Jesus uses it three times in his parables (Mt 18:27; Lk 10:33, 15:20), where it features prominently in the parable of the Good Samaritan – where the Good Samaritan “*was moved with compassion at the sight*” of the victim lying on the roadside – and in the parable of the Prodigal Son – where from afar the father catches sight of his returning son, is “*filled with compassion,*” and runs out to gather him into his arms.

That God is compassionate is certainly not limited to what is revealed in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, perhaps the first word that God uses to describe himself is the Hebrew word *channun*, which means gracious, merciful, compassionate. In Exodus 22:26, God says plainly: “*If [a poor person] cries out to me, I will listen; for I am compassionate.*” Shortly after that, in chapter 34 of Exodus – in a passage I’ve quoted twice in the past few weeks – as God reveals himself to Moses in the cloud on Mt Sinai, God calls

out that he is *"The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity."* God says of himself that he is *rachum, channun*, rich in *chesed*, all of these being Hebrew words that describe the compassionate nature of God, words that God uses of himself to reveal himself to his people.

Let me quote one final passage, from Psalm 103, where the same idea is conveyed, but this time with a powerful *parental* image: *"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him."* I said a parental image, not a paternal image. Though God is likened to a father who has compassion on his children, the Hebrew word here translated as compassion is *rachum*, which is the adjective form of the noun *rechem*, which means "womb." Astonishingly, God's fatherly compassion is in fact the tender love of a mother's womb, which calls to mind another, sublimely moving passage from the prophet Isaiah, where God speaks to his people who are crying out that the Lord has forgotten them, and God says to Zion, *"Can a mother forget her infant, be without [compassion] (rachum) for the child of her womb (beten)? Even should she forget, I will never forget you"* (Is 49:15).

So here's a question: what exactly is compassion? A perfectly serviceable definition, based on the context of how God is described as compassionate in the Scriptures, is that compassion is the desire to free others from suffering. Compassion is the desire to free others from suffering.

This means that the first movement of compassion is to notice the suffering and distress of others. This is what Jesus does in the opening line of today's gospel, he sees their suffering: "*At the sight of the crowds,*" who "*were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.*" The failure to see the suffering of others is spiritual and moral blindness. When we close our eyes and our ears so that we do not have to see or hear the sufferings of others (Mt 13:15), this is a willful moral and spiritual failing for which we will be made to answer. The Christian disciple has been given the light and grace to see, the light of truth, and so he or she cannot claim to be blind.

Just because I'm not suffering doesn't mean others aren't suffering. I have to open my eyes to see what is plainly before me. Just because others are suffering in ways I don't understand, or like, or approve of, just because they're "sinners," or homeless, or addicted, or whatever else puts them on the outs with me doesn't mean they're not suffering. I have to move out of myself and my little bubble of convenience and comfort and preconception to follow Jesus as his disciple, as if his way, and not mine, were the true path of life.

The second movement of compassion is to experience from within that visceral seizing of the *splangchna*, that movement of pity, that feeling of commiseration. Seeing the sufferings of another, I begin to suffer within myself. This is the heart of compassion, which Jesus exemplified when his "*heart was moved with pity*" for the crowds. Jesus saw their suffering, and he began to suffer within

himself. The failure to be moved within by the sufferings of others is the hardness of heart so often condemned in the scriptures (Dt 15:7, Ps 4:3, Ps 95:8, Mt 13:15), a hardness of heart that both angered and grieved Jesus (Mk 3:5).

The third movement of compassion is acting to alleviate the suffering that is before us. This, too, Jesus did on so many occasions, like when he laid his hands upon the sick and the lame to heal them, like when he fed the hungry thousands in their need, like in today's gospel, where he responds to the crowds, who were troubled and abandoned, like neglected sheep. To come to their aid, to relieve their suffering, Jesus gathers the Twelve and sends them out on a mission, a mission specifically to "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel,*" to those who had been abandoned by their own leaders, leaders who failed to see them in their distress, whose hearts were unmoved by compassion, who would not act to end the sufferings of their fellow countrymen.

Where the affluent and powerful, where the well-positioned and influential had failed to act, Jesus would move in not only with words, but also with deeds. Jesus charged the Twelve to proclaim the words "*the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" and then to perform the works of that kingdom, by curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the unclean, driving out demons. Where there was suffering – be it hunger, illness, poverty, social exclusion, ignorance – there the disciples would apply the necessary compassionate action. They would not delude themselves by being

hearers of the word only. No, their Teacher taught them to act, to be doers of the word (Jas 1:22). And the Word is compassion, compassion in all its aspects, for the Lord God himself is compassionate, merciful, gracious, and rich in lovingkindness.

So here's another question. Is compassion different from mercy? The two words are synonyms and can be mostly used interchangeably in general speech. But if we want to hazard a distinction, we could say, at least in our English language, and in the context of our present reflection, that mercy typically has to do with forgiving some wrongdoing, some offense, some sin, whereas compassion is focused on eliminating suffering. Mercy, we might say, is kindness applied to the sinner in order to remove sin. Compassion is kindness applied to the sufferer in order to remove suffering.

It seems to me that compassion is the broader category and contains mercy, that mercy is a specific type of compassion. I say this keeping in mind that in the scriptures, God is first described as compassionate and then later also as merciful. The two concepts are very similar, but first comes compassion. Then I consider that in this gospel passage, Jesus saw the crowds not as sinners in need of mercy, but as suffering and so in need of compassion. Their physical and spiritual suffering drew forth his heartfelt pity, his compassion. First, Jesus would address their physical and spiritual sufferings – he would heal them, feed them, and speak to them about the Father's tender love for them. Then, afterward, he would

address their moral suffering, their sin, and take it away. First compassion, and then mercy. Both kindnesses would be applied, but in a certain divinely-inspired order. Jesus would apply both kindnesses to take away suffering, the suffering of human misery and the suffering of sin, and in this Jesus confirmed and fulfilled the revelation that God in his compassion is also merciful and forgiving (Ps 78:38ff).

Let's go back to what I mentioned at the beginning, how many of our contemporaries think Buddha and Buddhists and not Jesus and Christians when they think of compassion. How is it that we've lost sight of this aspect of God, that is, his compassion, to such a degree that when others see us Christians or experience our presence in society they do not think of compassion, but rather of judgment and sin? Whether that characterization is fair or not, it really doesn't matter. Whether the problem is real or only perceived, it's still a problem. Our problem. And it seems to me, a problem of Christian compassion.

I ended my homily on Trinity Sunday pointing out that three times in the Scriptures we are instructed to be like God, to be as God is. First, *"Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy"* (Lev 19:2); second, *"So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Mt 5:48); and third, *"Be compassionate, just as also your Father is compassionate"* (Lk 6:36). Be holy; be perfect; be compassionate. Since in God all things are one, his perfection and holiness and compassion are all one. And since God in his compassion desires us to be free of suffering,

then we must be like our God, compassionate, merciful and gracious, abounding in lovingkindness.

I leave for your further reflection and as a plan of future action, a fresh translation to the beatitude we know so well, "*blessed are the compassionate, for they will be shown compassion*" (Mt 5:7). Blessed are they who desire to free others from suffering, for they shall be freed from their own suffering.