

He Had Compassion on Them!

As I was reading in *Matthew* this week, I was struck by the loveliness of one very brief paragraph. The literary intent of the paragraph seems to be nothing more than to serve as a transition statement that transports the reader from one important narrative to the next. But, as we consider what those two events were, we learn something about the heart of Jesus and in so learning, we also discover something about how closely our own hearts are aligned with His.

¹³When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. – *Matthew 14:13, 14*

What report did Jesus receive that caused Him to seek solitude? *Matthew 14:1-12* records the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas. John got under Herod's skin because he exposed him as an adulterer. He had taken as his own wife the lawful wife of his brother, Philip. Herod wanted to kill John, but he feared the crowds that believed John to be a prophet. However, Herodias, the adulteress in question, was not so cautious. When Herod made a stupid promise to grant any wish to the daughter of Herodias, because she danced well at his birthday party, the girl, prompted by her vindictive mother, asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod didn't want to lose face in the presence of his party guests who had overheard his reckless promise, so the heinous sentence was carried out.

When Jesus heard about this, He probably withdrew to grieve for His cousin and friend, John. The two men were very closely joined, not just as relatives, but as central figures in ushering in the Kingdom of God. John was a fiery preacher whose major theme was the need for national and personal repentance over sin in preparation for the coming of *Messiah*. According to Jesus, John was the Elijah figure of Old Testament prophecy whose appearance would mark the coming of the Kingdom of God. When Jesus began His public ministry, John directed his own disciples to become followers of "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (*John 1:29*). Of Jesus, John humbly told those who followed him, "He must become greater; I must become less" (*John 3:30*)."

There had been a time when Jesus had sent comforting words to John. Even John struggled in his faith as he sat in prison while Jesus' ministry shaped up to look nothing like the mighty reign of *Messiah* that the Jewish nation anticipated. He wondered if His cousin really was the Christ. Jesus sent a message reminding John of the miracles of healing that also must accompany the advent of *Messiah*. Then, to His own disciples, Jesus worded lofty praise for John, lauding his courage, his humility and his obedience to God. Jesus concluded the commendation, saying: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist ..." (*Matthew 11:11*).

Now, John was dead. The most natural human inclination in the world was to withdraw – to pray as Jesus certainly did or to languish in sorrow as those without hope in Christ tend to do. But, the beauty of that little paragraph is captured in the words: “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”

Evidently, as Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee from west to east, a crowd had run around the north edge of the lake and they were waiting for Him when He arrived. The “compassion” described in the text refers to a poignant surging of Jesus’ inner parts in response to the neediness of the multitude. Jesus healed their diseases and, when the hour was late, He miraculously fed them (the second narrative that follows the transition). Jesus would need His time of solitude with the Father and He would get it later in the evening. Still, when human need presented itself, Jesus’ heart ached to respond.

How do you deal with hurt and sorrow? Do you manage your hurt and sorrow, or do they manage you? Does hurt turn you inward or does it awaken your heart to a hurting world? Seek the heart and mind of Christ in this matter.

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