

The Gory of Compassion

... ³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. – Mark 6:34

Certainly, typos get by me every once in a while. Lest you think, the second word of my title is a misspelling, it's not. As Pee Wee Herman would say whenever he crashed his bike, "I meant to do that."

For, Jesus the last few weeks had been a flurry of activity. He had travelled extensively throughout the Jewish and pagan regions surrounding Lake Galilee, preaching His message of the kingdom. But, that message was not resonating among the masses as much as some of the other phenomena that accompanied His ministry. Jesus had power to deliver people from all sorts of afflictions. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame whole and delivered those oppressed by the menacing grip of demons. He even raised a young girl from the dead. These were the activities that kept Jesus the busiest. People were pressing in around him constantly.

The fame of Jesus' ministry expanded all the more when He sent His twelve Apostles out in pairs to preach and with many of His Own miraculous powers. Reports of Jesus even reached the palace of the paranoid Herod, who had executed John the Baptist. He concluded that the Baptist had returned to life. When the group finally reconvened, Jesus said, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." But, the crowds caught wind of where the group was heading, and a multitude was waiting for them when they arrived. Jesus and the Twelve had not debriefed regarding the preaching tours, they had not rested, they had not even eaten. Still, it was at this point that Jesus looked on these shepherdless sheep and "had compassion" on them.

The English word "compassion" comes from a Latin compound that means "feeling with", something more or less akin to empathy. That's nice, but a bit sanitized if the truth be known. The Gospel story was not recorded in Latin. The Greek term is a little more "gutsy" – literally. I'm grateful that I'm writing and don't have to pronounce *sphlangchnizomai*. From this word, we get the English medical term *splanchnic*, which refers to the internal vital organs.

The ancients would associate the word with many pagan worship practices that involved sacrificing an animal, burning its carcass and preparing its internal organs as a meal called the *splancha*. This same word, *splancha*, became the New Testament noun rendered, "compassion." The verb that described eating this meal, *sphlangchnizomai*, is the same word used for Jesus' reaction to the crowds.

Admittedly, these are strange images, but clearly, Jesus' response to this crowd was something that welled up from deep within Him. Whatever they were feeling from very deeply within themselves – helplessness, harassment, lostness, meaninglessness – Jesus was identifying with from very deeply within Himself. From the gut, He was moved with whatever was troubling them from the gut. He internalized their anguish, even anguish to which they had become accustomed.

Of course, Jesus has the power to act. He fed this multitude. On other occasions when this word described Jesus' response to people, it marked a turning point in their lives. A leper was healed. Two blind men received their sight. A demonically-afflicted child was restored to sanity. A young man was raised to life and restored to his widowed and grieving mother. When Jesus was moved to compassion, what followed was a turning point in someone's life.

“Empathy” is a healthy feeling to nurture, but Christ-like compassion is a far more “gutsy” thing. It will not only move you within. It will move you outwardly to act to whatever extent is required to set the life of another on a fresh new course.

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