

## **'Compassion, Tolerance and Acceptance' – Bible Study on Mark 6:30-44**

### **\* The Contemporary Context**

We (unconsciously) filter the text through our (general) world-view and our (particular) 'philosophies of life.' The original story, which has already been 'shaped' by the evangelist as it has been handed down, may be (unintentionally) obscured or (deliberately) re-interpreted to better conform to modern ideas/beliefs.

What presuppositions do we bring to the text?

### **(1) Public debate about 'Compassion'**

**(a)** Jesus would not have condoned the contempt directed against 'an entire class of persons' in his name. *'He seems to have been less concerned with sex than with compassion and forgiveness'* (Bishop Michael Ingham, Canada, 1996).

On this view, compassion means accepting people as they are, irrespective of whether their actions are good and just.

**(b)** *'Deliver us from compassion-speak'* (Fr Ephraim Chifley, *The Age*, 13/6/2000). There is great harm in 'the galloping omni-competence of church leaders vigorously pronouncing on anything at all under the heading 'compassion'.' Compassion based on tolerance of all sincere beliefs is used to justify 'ethical relativism and political correctness.' ... 'Compassion unlimited ... is a policy of irresponsible idealists, utopians and ideologues ... with a vested interest in the perpetuation of a guilt culture.' (Edgar French, *The Nation's Guilt*, p26)

On this view, compassion is a poor guide to what is good and just.

The contemporary situation is beautifully summed up by Sir Humphrey Appleby in *Yes Minister* when, in analysing language used to gain political power over others, he says,

I am compassionate.

You are kind (though not as well informed as I am).

Our opponent is ignorant, mean-spirited and reactionary.

If this snapshot of is accurate then contemporary debate is set up as the clash between '*Compassionate Liberals*' and '*Heartless Evangelicals*' in which the values of acceptance, tolerance and inclusiveness are held to be sacrosanct. Thus, any form of opposition to homosexuality is described as 'homophobic,' intolerant, unloving.

We cannot ignore these powerful cultural ideas as we are addressed by the text!

### **(2) What theological presuppositions do Christians bring to the text?**

What is the relationship between grace and law, Jesus and ethics, Christ and culture? Do we believe in mercy without righteousness or righteousness without mercy? Is the 'way of Jesus' the way of unconditional love for all or the way of reconciliation of sinners? How far do Christ's teaching and example apply to our different culture? How adaptive should the Church be to changing world-views? Is compassion a primary or secondary virtue?

\* **Exposition of Mk 6:30-44 // Mt 14:13-21 // Lk 9:10-17 and Mt 9:36**

### **(1) Historical-Theological Context**

**(a) The Gospel:** Mk (AD65-70) was written 35 years after end of Jesus' earthly ministry as part of the fledging Church's response to the '*man who fits no formula*' (E. Schweizer). Mk shows that the crucified and risen Jesus fulfils Old Testament hopes of a saviour to Israel and the nations in an unexpected way. He reflects on the (surprising) rejection of Jesus by religious leaders, citizens and disciples (3:6; 6:6f; 8:27f). ... The 'compassion of Jesus' was unacceptable!

#### **(b) The passage:**

(i) It is immediately preceded by:

... The mission of the 12 disciples to 'preach repentance,' destroy 'unclean spirits' and 'heal the sick' (vv7-13) and by

... Rumours that Js was a prophet or either Elijah or JB 'raised from the dead' (vv14-29). The beheading of the 'righteous and holy' JB (v20) has shaken the crowds.

(ii) It is immediately followed by

... The terror and unbelief of the disciples at Jesus' presence in the storm (vv45-52)

... The healing power of Jesus (vv53-56)

Therefore, we must understand the 'compassion of Js' in this small episode within the wider theological framework. Jesus is the rejected, crucified and risen Messiah of Israel who willingly obeys his divine calling to teach the truth, forgive sins, heal the sick and feed the hungry, thus being the means by which God reconciles humanity to himself.

### **(2) Exposition of Mk 6:30-44**

**(a)** Mk 6:34 // ... '*When he saw the crowd he had compassion on them, because they were {harassed and helpless Mt 9:36} like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things {welcomed them Lk 9:11} and healed their sick*' {Mk 6:53f; Mt 14:14 // Lk 9:11}

The Greek word for compassion means 'to be moved with pity from the depths of one's being (bowels, heart, intestines) for the plight of another person or persons.'

In the New Testament it is only used of Jesus or by people who call on him to act in some desperate situation or in parables where the 'Christ

figure' shows mercy. It is the action of the king who forgave a servant an unpayable debt ((Mt 18:27); the Samaritan who saved the beaten traveller from death (Lk 10:33) and the father who welcomed the son who had forfeited his inheritance (Lk 15:20). Elsewhere it is the emotion that results in healing the sick, restoring the outcast, raising the dead and forgiving sins. (See Mt 20:34 where Jesus heals two blind men; Mk 1:41 where Jesus heals a leper; Lk 7: 13 where Jesus revives the dead son of the widow of Nain.)

**(b)** 'The crowds' were like 'sheep without a shepherd' (v34f) – desperately seeking a messianic figure at a time of great evil (beheading of John the Baptist) and 'existential loneliness' (vv 30, 32 and 34). In Mk the 'crowds' signify bewilderment. Ironically, they are 'in a lonely place.' They have lost their bearings because, in evil times, they are being badly led – reminder of constant complaint of the prophets about bad shepherds and an implicit sign that Jesus is the truly 'Good Shepherd.'

Jesus does not abandon them (6:35-44). He 'feeds' them with food which sustains them in faith and hope. As God sustained the Hebrews with manna in the 'wilderness' (Num 11:6) so Js feeds them. As they look forward to the eschatological feast prepared for the nations by God (Is 25:6) so Js provides a sumptuous meal. Mk, therefore, tells us that God is present in the forgiving, healing and restorative actions of Jesus. ... Moreover, he tells the story so as to remind the reader of the Last Supper and their participation in the Lord's Supper (v21). Mk thus points forward to the death and resurrection of Jesus as the events which tell us most clearly that the compassion of God is revealed as costly love 'for us.'

**\* Conclusion:** Here in Mark (and events that follow), the compassion of Jesus is shown to be heartfelt identification with the plight of those who have 'lost their way' which is expressed in 'teaching' (v34), 'healing' (v53f) and 'sustenance of body and spirit' (vv35-44). ... His compassion is marked, not by tolerance of each and every life-style or cause, nor by condescension, but by 'teaching' and 'healing' which displays the truth that God, in mercy and love, frees 'the lost' from sin and restores them to life. The compassion of God means grace, healing and satisfaction of hunger for food, fellowship (vv 30, 32 and 34) and hope (vv35-44)!

Supremely, it is through his life, death and resurrection displays the compassion of God as outgoing love which does not accept the way things are!

Divine compassion, therefore, is not to be confused with benign indulgence. God is intolerant of sin, evil and death, challenging all that we do to separate ourselves from our created purpose and destiny. In reality, such 'intolerance' is the 'tolerance of grace' in that God forgives our sins and restores us to 'peace' with Him and each other.

To live in response to the compassion of God means that we, too, are to be intolerant of life-styles, political programs and social causes that display hostility to the will of God in Christ. We are to express the 'tolerance of grace' in lives marked by mercy which invites our fellows, too, to be changed by God's compassion' in Christ'.

Being compassionate towards people who suffer as a result of their own behaviour is fundamental to being Christian disciples (Gal 5:25-6:4) but it does not imply that we should accept what they do.

Mario Bergner, a former homosexual, says, 'I don't know any other group more harassed, helpless and lost than the gay community.' The church should neither condemn gays (Evangelicals) nor approve of homosexuality (Liberals) but speak the truth in love to all who are 'lost.' Appropriately for our study, this comes in a sermon on The Good Shepherd (1993), reminding us that the compassion of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does not fit our normal categories of thought and action.

Rev Dr Max Champion  
National Chair of RA  
16<sup>th</sup> July 2004