

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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at Aquinas Academy

UNIT FOUR SESSION SEVEN: Compassion



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When you visualized a man or a woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity – that was a quality God’s image carried with it. When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination.¹



Hell is yourself, ... and the only redemption is when a person puts himself aside to feel deeply for another person.²



Compassion is the abolition of the closed world of the self.³



The Lord passed before (Moses) and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.⁴



While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.⁵



¹ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, Penguin, 1971) 131.

² Tennessee Williams, cited in T E Kalem, “The Laureate of the Outcast”, *Time*, March 7, 1983, 88. Tennessee Williams here echoes Adrian van Kaam: : “Self-centredness, the refusal to be human and not God, is the core of the demonic in human nature.” (Adrain van Kaam, *The Demon and the Dove*, Duquesne University Press, 1967, 46-47.) The Christian tradition helps us to understand that process whereby we “put ourselves aside.” It is a matter of solitude, *facing and going through that which I alone can and must face and go through*. William Shannon, writing of Thomas Merton, sums it up well: “For his solitude had issued into what all true solitude must become: compassion.” (William H Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, Crossroad, 1996, 178.)

³ John S Dunne, *The Way of all the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*, Macmillan, 1972, 55.

⁴ Exodus 34:6-7.

⁵ Luke 15:20.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

* *Compassion is an expression of a deep-seated natural yearning in the human being.*

* *To the extent that I am compassionate I am human.*

* *To the extent that I lack compassion I am less than human.*



Feeling compassion⁶

Let us see if we can describe this deep-seated natural yearning of the human heart. Recall a time when you “felt compassion” for someone. Typically, these are the kinds of aspects that people will speak of when they say they “felt compassion”:

- Firstly, the focus is more in the *stomach* and *heart* than the head – it is first and foremost about *feeling* rather than thinking, though it also involves thinking in a certain way;
- Secondly, we are *moved towards the other*; we are inclined to go to the other – the other being in some sort of pain or difficulty or distress – and offer help; it is as if some kind of fellow-feeling is awakened in us by the situation of the other, a fellow-feeling that can lie dormant in the normal workaday world; this fellow-feeling is typically experienced as something entirely natural, with people saying things like, “What else could I do, he needed help;” though when the suffering is gone we may then withdraw into the separated self of the workaday world;
- Thirdly, the intent of this inclination towards the other is to bring “relief,” “freedom from pain/difficulty” etc; we want to help the other if we can and if we cannot help we just want to be there to support and perhaps encourage the other; the other’s pain draws us in some mysterious way that we cannot ignore to be *with* them and *for* them;
- Fourthly, we are more or less *self-forgetful* in that moment in which we “feel compassion” – our attention is captured by the pain and or need of the other; we go out of ourselves, we leave ourselves behind as it were, at least momentarily; we seem to move into a psychological place/state that is shared by both but owned by neither; the shared encounter is one of communion at some deep and mysterious level.

Feeling compassion seems to be a natural human reaction. We can expect it to

⁶ The English word compassion comes from the Latin words “patiri” meaning “to suffer” and “com” meaning “with.”

stir in some measure in any more or less healthy human being. However, it is possible that someone might be so affectively deadened – because of some psychopathology or strong prejudice or over-exposure to suffering or selfishness or self-absorption, for example⁷ – that this reaction does not surface. Even so, at least in principle, it would be reasonable to assume that the potential is there in all of us to feel compassion when faced with a sister or brother in pain.

The *response* that the individual makes, as distinct from the *reaction*, is another thing altogether. The individual may be more or less moved with this feeling of compassion but choose – implicitly or explicitly – to do nothing. That choice might be made for any number of reasons. Again, pathology or prejudice or selfishness or self-absorption or the like might come into play. Individuals can be brain washed to treat selected others harshly rather than compassionately. The individual might simply not have the courage or strength or possibility of acting compassionately in this instance.

Whatever our response to this “feeling” might be, we probably would all characterize it as pointing to something potentially rich and life giving and radically human and humanizing. If, for example, we were incapable of such feelings, it is hard to imagine us ever forming good human relationships. It might also suggest, at the very least, an insensitivity to others and perhaps even a destructive self-absorption of some kind. On the other hand, we are also aware that such “feelings” can lead to unrealistic and even destructive behaviour if they are not realistically assessed.⁸

Acting compassionately

Let us go one step further. Perhaps we can recall a time when we *chose to act in compassion*. We might observe several factors involved in this situation:

- Firstly, we must know pain⁹ first hand before we have enough sensitivity to respond to it in another, this normally assumes that we are willing and able

⁷ We could think, for example, of those men and women, throughout history, who have been willing to torture other people. This is repugnant to any normal human being, we find it at odds with our best possibilities. We rightly ask, “Why does one human being do this to another?”. We might even ask, “*How* can one human being do this to another?”.

⁸ See discussion of “Social Awareness” and “Social Conscience” in this Course, Unit Four, Session Five. See also the discussion of “Appraisal” in Unit Four, Session Four.

⁹ We can know pain in various ways. The most obvious is physical pain. The less obvious but more troubling is psychological pain. The most deep and distressing pain is spiritual pain. Physical pain can be seen and diagnosed and treated with medication and it generally elicits sympathy fairly easily. Psychological pain is not so accessible to diagnosis and treatment and therefore not so likely to elicit sympathy. Spiritual pain is accessible only to the spiritual guide, it allows no medication and elicits no sympathy. It can be almost unbearable. Spiritual pain necessarily calls us into solitude, the process in which we face and live through what we alone can and must face and live through. This is passover.

to acknowledge and face the pain we carry in our lives; we enter the world of compassion via the world of suffering – there is no other way; the refusal to face our own pain is a refusal to discover compassion, which brings up a second factor:

- we are probably more likely to act in genuine compassion if we have first experienced genuine compassion ourselves – the ability to be compassionate and to act compassionately seems to bear some relationship to whether or not others – or at least some other – have or has been compassionate to us; and that is probably closely linked to whether or not we are capable of being compassionate to ourselves; it seems that we need to be set free of ourselves by suffering and the experience of compassion before we can move in genuine compassion towards others who are suffering, which brings up a third factor:
- whether or not we *feel* compassion for the other in this or that moment is actually secondary when we *choose* to act in compassion – in fact we may have mixed feelings, including some inner resistances; that said, it probably would not be *genuine* compassion if there was no *feeling* of compassion present – it could easily fall into “willful charity” if there was no genuine fellow-feeling moving us towards the other;¹⁰ which brings up a fourth factor:
- we can only act compassionately when we *take the other seriously* – when that *other*, in his or her actual pain, is the focus of our attention; we can only do this to the extent that we are *self-forgetful*; in other words, we are only able to move towards the other when we are able to leave ourselves behind, as it were; and the paradox in this is that we actually find ourselves when we lose ourselves in this way; the real self is not the disconnected individual but the participant in communion with other participants, which brings up a fifth factor:
- in the movement of genuine compassion we tend to experience a certain *wholeness* – it is, typically, an experience of integrity, one in which we feel drawn towards the True and the Good, the Beautiful and the One; it is as if this moment of genuine compassion is more real, in it we are more ourselves and more in tune with the world, than in many (most?) other moments; compassion is “homecoming.” Through the experience of compassion for another I leave myself behind and thus discover myself, which brings up a sixth factor:
- when we choose to act compassionately towards another, it is more an act of *surrender* than *mastery*; in some peculiar way, our choice for compassion is a choice to receive and participate; compassion is a gift and even as we

¹⁰ Frederick Ozanam (1813-1853), founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society, is supposed to have said: “If you do not love the poor they will never forgive you for helping them.”

choose to give of ourselves we are the recipients of “something;” which brings up a seventh and final factor:

- choosing to be compassionate is accompanied by a shifting centre of gravity in our lives; true compassion is never egocentric, it always tends towards Mystery-centricity

The connection between “feeling” and “behaving” compassionately

When we choose to act in compassion towards another, we are, in effect giving concrete form to the intention that seems to be inherent in what we described earlier as “feeling compassion” for another. If the foregoing is correct, perhaps what we in fact touch in both the “feeling” of compassion and the “choosing and doing” of compassion, is the profound truth that *compassion and authenticity are one*? That in and through compassion we come to be real? That without compassion we cannot be real?

It also becomes obvious that compassion is more a matter of *being* than *doing*. When we “act in compassion” we act in a certain way. That is, we are *present* to the other in a certain way. Two people, for example, might do the same thing – one is compassionate, the other is not. The compassion is in the being, the presence, and it is communicated and manifest in the process of being there for and with the other. Compassion is *being-with* in a certain way. In fact, we might not be able to *do* anything for the other.

So that, when we “feel” compassion perhaps we could say we are *awakening*, in our bodyliness, to the depths of life and being. We, in fact, connect with the depths of our own being where we know ourselves and the other to be one, where healing and wholeness and oneness are more real than disease (dis-ease), brokenness and disunity. And when we respond and “choose and act in compassion,” what we are in fact doing is allowing life and being and the truth of who we most deeply are to possess us and flow into and through us in ways that we normally do not allow.

When we choose and act in compassion, we are at once:

- “do-ers,”
- “instruments,”
- “receivers” and
- fellow travellers.

When compassion is genuine, then we have allowed ourselves to be caught in this deeper stream of life which tends towards communion. In this experience we know – in retrospect generally – that in the giving we receive, in tending the broken our own brokenness is healed, in feeding the hungry our own (heart’s) hunger is

fed, in visiting the sick we bring healing touch to our own infirmity.¹¹ The giving is more a question of allowing ourselves to be instruments of some reality bigger than ourselves. What passes through us to the other is as much a gift to us as it is a gift to the other. The experience and practice of compassion reminds us of our own inherent neediness – none of us is ever beyond the need for compassion. Through compassion we become one with the other pilgrims in their human journeys.

In compassion the *receptive* component is more significant than the *productive* component. It is not within our control and mastery. We do not “achieve” compassion we receive it, even when we are the compassionate ones.

Receiving compassion

What is it like when you are in pain or distress and you need the compassion of others and you find it? We might observe several factors involved in this situation:

- Firstly, when we experience genuine compassion from another, *the experience itself is a healing one, quite apart from what the other actually does for us* – the presence of the compassionate other communicates a gentle but firm statement to the depths of our beings, saying “It’s okay!” or perhaps more importantly, “*You* are okay!”;
- Secondly, we feel some deep and real *connecting* happening through the compassionate presence of the other – that connecting is with the other – there is genuine empathy and fellow feeling – but it is also with ourselves – the pain had somehow disconnected us from ourselves; the other, in being compassionate – as distinct from the actual practical help as such – re-connects us with life;
- Thirdly, the compassionate presence of the other elicits both *hope* and *freedom* even in the brokenness and hurt; for a moment at least we forget our pain, the compassion opens up a new, life-giving sense.
- Fourthly, we experience the other as genuinely concerned for *us* and not merely satisfying something in himself or herself – we are not being used in our vulnerability; there are no strings attached; the presence of the compassionate other manifests a larger “presence”;
- Fifthly, the other is experienced as *humble* – this person does not convey any sense of superiority, because he or she has tasted the ashes of life also; the other is self-forgetful and if there is any sense in which the other is in focus it is because we are sincerely grateful to that other.

The experience of genuine compassion stands in stark contrast to those experiences where – perhaps under the guise of compassion – we are used or

¹¹ See the discussion of the “giving and receiving” of the Formation Mystery in this Course, Unit Four, Session Two.

manipulated, where others convey an unmistakable sense of superiority or paternalism, where the other in fact resents or resists the service they are giving or the other is doing it as a “job” or “duty.” At the heart of compassion is a certain “connectedness” and each of these instances implies the very opposite, a certain “disconnectedness.” When we are vulnerable we are, typically, also highly sensitive – at least unconsciously – to the hidden agendas and pretences and unresolved tensions in human behaviour that often go unnoticed in the workaday world. Genuine compassion begins where self-serving agendas and self-indulgence cease.

Being compassionate with ourselves

Finally, we can consider the experience of *being compassionate with ourselves*. This is a subtle issue. Let us see if we can name some of the factors involved:

- Firstly, when we are compassionate towards ourselves we are *non-judgemental* – our first response is a matter of fact acknowledgement;
- Secondly, we are as *honest* as we can possibly be in facing what is happening with us – compassion does not thrive when we lie to ourselves about ourselves;
- Thirdly, we *work* to become aware of the truth of what is going on in our lives – compassion actually involves commitment and effort and sacrifice;
- Fourthly, we *trust* the movement of life in this moment of pain or brokenness – our attitude to the experience is positive, expecting to encounter growth and wisdom here;
- Fifthly, *we stay there*; we submit to the truth of it all, no matter how dark and painful it might be; we do not flee or evade the moment of pain;
- Sixthly, compassion emerges, it is a discovery not a fabrication or willed achievement; we learn one of the most liberating lessons of life: Compassion is already given! It is part of the inherent graciousness of life.

Genuine compassion for self is a far cry from self-absorption or narcissism or self-pity. Genuine compassion is, in fact, a powerful antidote to such things, it is the enemy of selfishness of all kinds. We do tend to be self-absorbed when we are in pain. Sometimes, in a misguided attempt to foster “self-esteem,” individuals are encouraged to focus just on the positive things and keep saying positive things to themselves and dismiss the negatives from their lives. Paradoxically, the way to a strong and healthy sense of self must pass through some dark and painful truths about the self. This journey cannot be made without compassion – this journey *is* compassion. In this sense, compassion may be seen as the heart of genuine self-esteem.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

** That quality of God we attempt to describe by the word compassion – also described by words such as mercy, pity and steadfast love – is the living heart of the Covenant.*

** To be a Covenant person – ie a disciple of Jesus – we simply accept the invitation, given moment by moment in every day, to be drawn into the compassion of God and in this way we each become a place where God’s infinite compassion enters the world.*

** The Christian vocation may be summed up as follows: As you have been loved into freedom, go into the world that God may love others into freedom through you.*



God’s biological compassion

a. The Jewish Scriptures

In the Book of Exodus – and other places in the Jewish Scriptures – there is a special Hebrew word, which is derived from the word for “womb” or more generally that part of a woman’s body which nurtures new life into being – her *depths* or *bowels*. The Hebrew word is *r^ech^em*¹² and it is used to describe something essential about the God of the Covenant. It is translated by various English words, such as “mercy,” “tenderness,” “gracious” and, of course, “compassion.” This Hebrew word is used twice, for example, in Exodus 33:19:

And he said: ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The Lord”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (New Revised Standard Version)

The New Jerusalem Bible translates it as *gracious* in the first instance and *pity* in the second; the King James Version uses *gracious* and *mercy*. The same Hebrew word is used again in Exodus 34:6:

*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,
“The Lord, the Lord,*

¹² The written Hebrew has no vowels, only consonants. The vowels must be supplied in the spoken form. Hence the need for careful education as to the meaning of the text, the vowels making a deal of difference to the final meaning communicated.

*a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*
(New Revised Standard Version)

The New Jerusalem Bible translates it as *tenderness* and the King James Version as *merciful*.

In Isaiah 49:15 we read in the New Revised Standard Version:

*Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.*

The same word is rendered in the English by The New Jerusalem Bible as *pity* and by the King James Version as *compassion*.

In order to get a deeper sense of what is being described in this word, however, we might consider the story in the First Book of the Kings in which Solomon is asked to adjudicate between two women claiming the one infant.¹³ One of those women had accidentally rolled on her baby and smothered it in the night. She then claimed the other baby. How does Solomon sort this matter out? He threatens to cut the living baby in two! On the face of it, this seems an awfully brutal and feelingless thing to even suggest. In fact it demonstrates a deep sensibility in Solomon. Listen to the way the story proceeds in the light of Solomon's suggestion:

Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it.¹⁴

The Hebrew word *r^echem* carries with it all the connotations of the passionate, non-rational attachment a mother typically has for the child of her womb. And it is applied, without apology, embarrassment or qualification to Yahweh.

¹³ 1Kings 3:16-28.

¹⁴ 1Kg 3:26. This translation is from the King James Version. It is used because it seems to bring us closer to what the Hebrew says. Compare it with the New Jerusalem Bible: "At this the woman who was the mother of the living child addressed the king, for *she felt acutely for her son ...*"

b. The Christian Scriptures

An equivalent of the Hebrew word *r'chem* is found in the Greek word *splagchnizesthai*.¹⁵ *Splagchnizesthai* is the verb which comes from the noun *splagchna* which means the noble viscera – the heart, lungs, liver and intestines. In classical Greek the *splagchna* refers metaphorically to the inner parts of the person, the seat of emotions. Thus the verb *splagchnizesthai* means to be moved with compassion. It implies a movement of emotion in the depths of the person's being. It is the strongest word in Greek for the feeling of compassion.

It would have been totally out of the question for the Greeks to apply this word to anyone thought to be divine. The Greeks believed in a god who could not feel – to them, a divine being moved with compassion would not have been divine. (The implication of compassion is that, in some way you are vulnerable, to some extent you are in the power of the one for whom you have compassion.)

In the Christian Scriptures, the word never appears outside the Synoptic Gospels, and except for three occurrences in the parables it is always used directly of Jesus himself:

➤ The Parables:

- Matthew 18:23-35 – the parable of the unforgiving debtor; in v.27: *splagchnistheis* – “the servant’s master felt sorry for him”(JB); “out of pity for him” (NRSV).
- Luke 15:11-32 – the parable of the lost son; in v.20: *esplagchnisthē* – “his father saw him and was moved with pity” (JB); “his father saw him and was filled with compassion” (NRSV).
- Luke 10:29-37 – the parable of the good Samaritan; in v.33: *esplagchnisthē* – “(the Samaritan) was moved with compassion when he saw him” (JB); “he was moved with pity” (NRSV).

➤ Describing Jesus:

- Matthew 9:36 – when he saw the crowd “like sheep without a shepherd”: *esplagchnisthē* – “he felt sorry for them” (JB); “he had compassion for them” (NRSV). (See also Mark 6:34).
- Matthew 14:14 – he saw their hunger and need when the crowds had followed him into the desert: *esplagchnisthē* – “he took pity on them” (JB); “he had compassion for them” (NRSV). (See also Matthew 15:32 – *splagchnizomai* – “I feel sorry for all these people” (JB); “I have compassion for the crowd” (NRSV). See also Mark 8:2 – *splagchnizomai*).
- Mark 1:41 – Jesus has compassion on the leper: *splagchnistheis* – “feeling sorry for him” (JB); “Moved with pity” (NRSV).

¹⁵ See William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, SCM Press, 1955/64, 276-280.

- Matthew 20:34 – his compassion on the two blind men: *splagchnistheis* – “Jesus felt pity for them” (JB); “Moved with compassion” (NRSV).
- Luke 7:13 – Jesus has compassion on the widow of Nain: *esplagchnisthē* – “he felt sorry for her” (JB); “he had compassion for her” (NRSV).
- Mark 9:22 – the man with the epileptic son appeals for pity: *splagchnistheis* – “have pity on us” (JB); “have pity on us” (NRSV).

God’s deliberate compassion

The notion of compassion, as applied to God, is only partially described in the Hebrew word *r^ech^em* and the Greek word *splagchnizesthai*. Each of these words implies a strong instinctive, even biological, movement. The Bible’s understanding of the compassion of God is completed by a concept that emphasizes free choice and commitment. The Hebrew word generally used in this context is *h^es^ed* and is variously translated by words such as *loving kindness* or *steadfast love* or *faithful love*. The New Jerusalem Bible says of this notion:

The primary meaning of this expression (h^es^ed) is that of a bond or contract. When used of human relationships it comes to mean friendship, union, loyalty, especially when these are the outcome of a treaty. Used of God, the term means his faithfulness to his covenant and the kindness he therefore shows his chosen people (in Exodus 34:6). Used by Hosea in the context of married love, the word assumes and from then on retains a still warmer significance: it means the tender love God has for his people, Psalm 136; Jeremiah 31:3; etc, and the benefits deriving from it, Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 5:10; 2Samuel 22:51; Psalm 18:50; Jeremiah 32:18. But this divine h^es^ed calls for corresponding h^es^ed among human beings, 6:6, consisting of self-giving, loving trust, abandonment, deep affection, ‘piety, a love (in short) which is a joyful submission to the will of God and an active charity to one’s fellows, 6:6.¹⁶

The shocking power of *h^es^ed* is nowhere better portrayed than in the very life of the prophet Hosea. Hosea’s ministry begins in the reign of Jeroboam II (784-746BC). This is a time of prosperity and peace in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Like his contemporary Amos, Hosea also sees the greed and oppression and diminution of true worship of Yahweh, all signifying a deeper infidelity to the Covenant. However, the Prophet bears witness to the fact that Yahweh’s love is everlasting. In his *h^es^ed*, Yahweh will persistently seek reconciliation. Hosea bears witness to this steadfast love in the stark imagery of his own life. Listen to the poignancy of this passage from the Prophet:

¹⁶ See footnote to Hosea 2:22(20) in the New Jerusalem Bible.

Yahweh said to me, 'Go again, love a woman who loves another man, an adulteress, and love her as Yahweh loves the Israelites although they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes'. So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver, a homer of barley and a skin of wine, and I said to her, 'You will have to spend a long time waiting for me without playing the whore and without giving yourself to any man, and I will behave in the same way towards you'.¹⁷

Hosea describes how he redeems his wife from prostitution. There she is, on sale, and he buys her back. And the story says: “That is how God loves you.” There is something incomprehensible, even mad about this kind of love. It just does not fit our definitions of love. Is this not breaking all the rules? One author helps us to hold the unbearable tension of this scandalous love when he writes:

Hosea hears the heartbroken cry of a God who loves deeply, faithfully, relentlessly, a God who cannot abandon the chosen people, even when they turn away. Hosea's prophecy lays to rest the common fiction that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgement and the God of the New Testament is the God of love. With the single exception of the cross, there is no more powerful picture of the love of God.¹⁸

Tom Wright offers us a pithy reflection reminding us that this “God of the Old Testament” is also “God of the New Testament:”

Try imagining the Old Testament God for a minute – passionate, involved with his people in their wanderings and stupidity, loving them tenderly and rescuing them again and again, grieving over their folly and their pain, taking costly action to redeem them. What would that God look like if he were to become human, and live among us humans? I think he would look very much like Jesus of Nazareth; and never more so than as he hangs dying on the cross.¹⁹

In the Christian Scriptures we find the Cross as the pre-eminent symbol of God's incomprehensible, persistent, overwhelming and even mad love and compassion. But it is also found in the parables of Jesus – eg the so-called parable of the prodigal son.²⁰ If we think we understand God's compassion, it is not God's compassion. If we have not been overwhelmed and utterly confounded and even terrified by God's compassion, we probably have not experienced God's

¹⁷ Hosea 3:1-3.

¹⁸ James A Harnish, *God Isn't Finished With Us Yet*, Upper Room, 1991, 32.

¹⁹ N T Wright, *The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit*, William B Eerdmans, 1992, 53-54.

²⁰ See Luke 15:11-32. This parable might be more aptly called the parable of the prodigal father. What would you call this parable?

compassion, or only experienced the tiniest hint of it. Graham Greene's whisky priest gives us some suggestion of this truth:

*They lay quiet for a while in the hut. The priest thought the lieutenant was asleep until he spoke again. 'You never talk straight. You say one thing to me -- but to another man, or a woman, you say, "God is love". But you think that stuff won't go down with me so you say different things. Things you'll know I'll agree with.' 'Oh,' the priest said, 'that's another thing altogether -- God is love. I don't say the heart doesn't feel a taste of it, but what a taste. The smallest glass of love mixed with a pint pot of ditch-water. We wouldn't recognize that love. It might even look like hate. It would be enough to scare us -- God's love. It set fire to a bus in the desert, didn't it, and smashed open graves and set the dead to walking in the dark. Oh, a man like me would run a mile to get away if he felt that love around.*²¹

This is the Love/Compassion/Mercy that sent God's Son into the world, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.²² This is now *our* life. When John speaks of "love" he is speaking of the same indescribable quality of God:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one

²¹ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, Penguin, 1982, 199-200.

²² See John 3:16. And we have that beautiful statement by St Paul in Romans 8:31-39: "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Or again in Romans 5:1-5: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.²³

Insight from the tradition

St Bernard of Clairvaux speaks with practical wisdom when he writes:

I have done my best to set out the blessings which come from climbing up the ladder of humility. Now I shall explain as well as I can the way that these blessings lead to the promised prize-attaining truth. As understanding truth comes gradually, I will try to show the three steps of truth, so that the twelve steps of humility are seen more clearly.

We must look for truth in ourselves, in our neighbours and in truth itself. Firstly, we find it in ourselves through self-examination. Secondly, we find it in our neighbours through being one with them through compassion. Thirdly, we find the centre of truth through a direct vision from God which is given to the pure in heart. Notice both the number of steps and their order. To start with, allow him who is the truth to teach you that you must search for it in those who are around you, before you search for the purity of truth itself. Later you will learn why you must search for it in yourself (23) before you look for it in your

²³ 1John 4:7-21. Compare this last sentence of 1John with Matthew 22:34-40: "When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Jesus here quotes from the Shema and from Leviticus 19:8. It is worth looking closely at that nineteenth chapter of Leviticus – it echoes the Decalogue of Exodus 20 but has a much more explicit and extensive set of injunctions for social justice. See also Mark 12:28-31 and Luke 10:25-28.

neighbours. It is the same way that Jesus placed 'the merciful' before 'the pure in heart' in the beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. For the merciful quickly discover truth in their neighbours when they are compassionate to them. In this way they identify themselves with them, feeling their good and bad qualities as if they were their own. They are weak with those who are weak and they inwardly burn with those who are led into sin (cf Matthew 11:29). They have made it their habit to 'rejoice with those who rejoice' and 'mourn with those who mourn' (cf John 8:12). When their spiritual sight has been clarified and sharpened through their love for the Christian brethren, they will delight to contemplate the truth for its own sake, and because of their love of the truth they will look compassionately on other people's faults.

How can people who do not become involved with their brothers, and who actually mock the tearful and make fun of the joyful, possibly see truth in their neighbours? They cannot possibly empathise with people they don't know. The famous saying puts it well, 'A healthy man has no idea what an ill person is suffering, neither does a well-fed person know what a hungry person goes through.' A sick person can feel for the sick, and a hungry person can understand the plight of the hungry, especially when those who suffer are in similar circumstances. Just as pure truth is only properly understood by the pure in heart, so another's sadness is best understood by the sad in heart.

If your heart is to be touched by other people's sorrows you have to recognise your own sinful condition, which you may see reproduced in your neighbour, and in this way you will be able to help your neighbour.²⁴



²⁴ St Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1982, (Part I, Chapter 3), 23-25.

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“If he submitted to human misery so that he might not simply know of it, but experience it as well, how much more ought you not make any change in your condition, but pay attention to what you are, because you are truly full of misery. This is the only way if you are to learn to be merciful. If you have eyes for the shortcomings of your neighbour and not for your own, no feeling of mercy will arise in you but indignation. You will be more ready to judge than to help, to crush in the spirit of anger than to instruct in the spirit of gentleness.”*²⁵



(2) *“Christian doctrine on the wounded heart, or original sin, appears to me the one reality which is easily verified. It would be an error to believe that if there were no oppressive parents, if there was no oppressive society, then we would have only beautiful children, loving, happy, integrated within themselves. No, in the heart of each of us, there is division, there is fear, there is fragility; there is a defense system which protects our vulnerability, there is flight from pain, there is evil and there is darkness”.*²⁶



(3) *“Have you thought that He stained Himself, soiled Himself, being not only with men, but Himself a man ... And it wasn't that He put on man like a jacket to take off at night, or to bathe ... But man He was, as man is man, the maker made Himself the made; God was un-Godded by His own hand ... He was God from before the beginning, and now never to be clean God again. Never again. Alas! Hosanna!”*²⁷



(4) *“To say I am made in the image and likeness of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. ... Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”*²⁸



(5) *“God's love for us is not the reason for which we should love him. God's love for us is the reason for us to love ourselves. How could we love ourselves without this motive?”*²⁹

²⁵ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "The Steps of Humility and Pride", III, 6.

²⁶ Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them*, St. Paul Publications, 1985, 18.

²⁷ H.F.M. Prescott, *The Man on a Donkey, Volume 2*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952, 510-511.

²⁸ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, 1972, 60.

(6) *"Who am I? ... I am one loved by Christ."*³⁰



(7) *"After that it got pretty late. And we both hadda go, but it was great seeing Annie again, right? I realized what a terrific person she was and - and how much fun it was just knowing her and I - I thought of that old joke, you know, this-this-this guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, 'Doc, uh, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken.' And, uh, the doctor says, 'Well, why don't you turn him in?' And pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd and ... but, uh, I guess we keep goin' through it because, uh, most of us need the eggs."*³¹



(8) *"Caring is the greatest thing, caring matters most."*³²



(9) *"'If you knew the gift of God!' (Jn 4:10). The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for God."*³³



(10) *"Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you! Behold you were within me while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me but I was not with you. They kept me far from you, those fair things which, if they were not in you would not exist at all."*³⁴



²⁹ Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, Ed. George A. Panichas, David McKay, 1977, 351.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, "Conference on Prayer," *Sisters Today*, XLI (1970), 5.

³¹ Woody Allen, "Annie Hall" in *Four Films of Woody Allen*, Random House, 1982, 105.

³² Last words of Freiderich Von Hugel, cited in *The Quiet Eye*, compiled by Sylvia Shaw Judson, Regnery Gateway, 1982, 67.

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.2560.

³⁴ St Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X, Chapter 27.

(11) “‘We must weakly carry our cross’ Thérèse remarked. Yes, if we love mercy, we must consent to leading our lives and carrying our cross deplorably badly. Only then do we know that we haven’t been cheating, we know that we’ve reached the light at the last. Yes, says God, this is all I ask of you and you will be my disciple.”³⁵



(12) “(A) significant moment comes when you cross the threshold from control into compassion. The heart’s wavelength changes. The illusion of having answers crumbles. A quite wonder takes its place. The manager dies and vulnerability comes to life. This space of helplessness is a source of deep humanity.”³⁶



(13) “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”³⁷



(14) “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat

³⁵ Bernard Bro, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux*, Christian Classics, 1980, 82.

³⁶ Michael Paul Gallagher, *Dive Deeper: The Human Poetry of Faith*, Darton Longman Todd, 2001, 96.

³⁷ 1Corinthians 13:1-13.

do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." ³⁹ He also told them a parable: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? ⁴⁰ A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. ⁴¹ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴² Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."³⁸



(15) "There is at this moment, in the world, at the back of some forsaken church, or even in an ordinary house, or at the turning of a deserted path, a poor man who joins his hands and from the depth of his misery, without very well knowing what he is saying, or without saying anything, thanks the good Lord for having made him free, for having made him capable of loving. There is somewhere else, I do not know where, a mother who hides her face for the last time in the hollow of a little breast which will beat no more, a mother next to her dead child who offers to God the groan of an exhausted resignation, as if the Voice which has thrown the suns into space as a hand throws grain, the Voice which makes the worlds tremble, had just murmured gently into her ear, "Pardon me. One day you will know, you will understand, you will give me thanks. But now, what I am looking for from you is your pardon. Pardon." These--this harassed woman, this poor man--are at the heart of the mystery, at the heart of the universal creation and in the very secret of God. What can I say of it? Language is at the service of intelligence. And what these people have understood, they have understood by a faculty superior to the intelligence although not in the least in contradiction with it nor rather, by a profound and

³⁸ Luke 6:27-38. See also Matthew 5:39-40.

irresistible movement of the soul which engaged all the faculties at once, which engaged to the depth of their entire nature ... Yes, at the moment that this man, this woman, accepted their destiny, accepted themselves, humbly – the mystery of the creation was being accomplished in them. While they were thus, without knowing it, running the entire risk of their human conduct, they were realizing themselves fully in the charity of Christ, becoming themselves, according to the words of St. Paul, other Christs. In short, they were saints.”³⁹



(16) *“If my compassion is true, if it be a deep compassion of the heart and not a legal affair, or a mercy learned from a book and practiced on others like a pious exercise, then my compassion for others is God's mercy for me. My patience with them is His patience with me. My love for them is His love for me.”*⁴⁰



(17) *“Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.”*⁴¹



(18) *“An elder said: Do not judge a fornicator if you are chaste, for if you do, you too are violating the law as much as he is. For He who said thou shalt not fornicate also said thou shalt not judge.”*⁴²



³⁹ Georges Bernanos in Louis Evelyn, *Suffering*, trans. Marie Claude Thompson, Herder & Herder, 1967, 7-8.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, HBJ, 1978, 212.

⁴¹ Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection of the Christian Life*, Image, 1982, 4.

⁴² Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, New Directions, 1960, 41.

Suggestions for further study

- Cinema *Ikiru* (1952) (Dir: Akira Kurosawa with Takashi Shimura)
 Tender Mercies (1983) (Dir: Bruce Beresford with Robert Duvall)
 Secrets and Lies (1996) (Dir: Mike Leigh with Brenda Blethyn and Marianne Jean-Baptiste)
 Kolya (1996) (Dir: Jan Sverak with Zdenek Sverak and Ondrez Vetchy)
 Lantana (2001) (Dir: Ray Lawrence with Anthony LaPaglia, Kerry Armstrong)
- Dunne, John S, *The Way of All The Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*, Macmillan, 1972 – especially “The Simple Life”.
- Durckheim, Karlfried, *Hara: The Vital Centre of Man*, Unwin Paperbacks, 1962/1988.
- Gallagher, Michael P, *Dive Deeper: The Human Poetry of Faith*, Darton Longman Todd, 2001.
- Griffith, Bede *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, Amity House, 1987.
- Hillesum, Ety *Ety - A Diary 1941-43*, Triad/Panther, 1983.
- Matthews, Iain *The Impact of God*
- Vanier, Jean, *Man and Woman He Made Them*, St. Paul Publications, 1985.
- Whelan, Michael, *Without God All Things Are Lawful*, St Pauls, 1995, - especially Chapters 2 (“When the Gold Leaf Wears Off”) and 16 (“Passing Over”).
- , *The Call To Be*, St Pauls, 1986/2000 – especially Chapter 12 (“The Call To Compassion”).



Suggested exercises

1. Take some time to meditate on Luke 15:11-32. Perhaps you could write down your thoughts and feelings in reaction to this text, as honestly as you possibly can.
2. Take note of the people you see around you this week. Observe “the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew” Think of each of them as a “story”, a tragicomic story like you.
3. Take particular care to listen for your own ability to stay with your moments of inner pain. Just be present to yourself in that. You might find it helpful to recite the Jesus Prayer when you feel hard pressed.
4. In the coming days listen carefully when you feel moved in a negative way towards another or when you are inclined to pass negative judgment on a person, event or thing. Often we are called to make assessment of this and that. What is at issue here is something that is more or less motivated by negativity rather than the simple desire or need to make an assessment. Passing judgment on another is autobiographical! You might spend some time meditating on snippet #14 above. Talk to the Lord about it. Use the focusing technique to let your feelings reveal themselves. Allow your own brokenness to be an occasion of growth and freedom.

