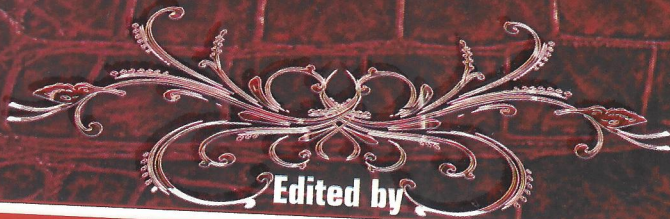




# *Growing* in Compassion



Edited by

**Sr Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu**

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick (Matthew 14:14). Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way" (Matthew 15:32). Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him (Matthew 20:34). So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him (Luke 15:20). For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy (Romans 9:15-16). As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (Colossians 3:12). For the Lord is compassionate and merciful; he forgives sins and saves in time of distress (Sirach 2:11).

# Growing in Compassion

selflessness  
vulnerable  
nonjudgmental  
patience charity giving  
humility empathy caring  
brave open-hearted warm  
gentle listening  
loyal safe understanding  
acceptance kind nurturing  
love detached compassion respect  
supportive thoughtful  
considerate

## Chapter Two

### *The Biblical Meaning of Compassion*

*By Sr Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu*

---

#### **1. Introduction**

The English word 'compassion' is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum*, which together mean 'to suffer with'. As this meaning of the word suggests, it involves something more than pity, almsgiving, kindness or tender-heartedness. It requires that one enters into the world of a sufferer in order to be with or identify with the sufferer. Nevertheless, it does not immediately imply that this identification change the sufferer's situation. The Bible is our source for understanding the many dimensions of the meaning of compassion in God's dealing with us human beings.

#### **2. Compassion in the Old Testament**

The Old Testament (OT) speaks of compassion by using terminologies which may be translated in many other ways. Two expressions are used in particular: *Hesed* and *Rahamim*.

## 2.1 Meaning of the Vocabulary

The word *hesed* is translated as grace, faithfulness, love, mercy, steadfast love or goodness. It is used for a relationship that is sustained by the faithfulness and commitment of a partner. *Hesed* is the attitude of a person who remains unchanging and faithful in the demands of a relationship even when the other partner is unfaithful. This is the word that describes God's attitude towards Israel in the covenant relationship. This reality is expressed, for instance, in Ps 78:38-40:

*Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger, and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again. How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!*

The second word that describes the reality of compassion is the word *Rahamīm*, translated as love, mercy and compassion. This word is the feminine synonym of the kind of faithfulness and commitment which *hesed* describes. The word *rahamīm* derives from the Hebrew word for a woman's 'womb' (*rehem*), and so it denotes the love of a mother for the child of her womb. This word, translated as 'merciful', comes closest to what compassion means. As in the case of *hesed*, *rahamim* also

exists within a relationship of a deep bonding between two parties, the type of deep bond that links a mother to her baby. From this link, there derives an attitude that is completely gratuitous and unmerited.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the meaning of the word includes a wide dimension of attitudes like love, tenderness, goodness, patience, understanding, and readiness to forgive, and its antonym is coldness and insensitivity. In the Igbo language, phrases that could describe a compassionate person are: *onye afo-oma* (literarily, 'a person with good womb') or *onye obiebere* (a person with good heart) and the antonym would be *onye afo tara mmiri* (a person with dry womb) or *onye obi ojoo* (person with an evil heart). The attitudes which compassion evokes are connected to the heart and to the womb, and these symbolize its warm and life-giving effects.

When used of God, the word implies that God loves the way a woman loves the child of her womb. In some OT texts where this word is found, it describes the love of God for Israel, a love that is faithful and invincible, thanks to the mysterious power of God's motherly affection.

**Isaiah 49:15** 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 4.

**Hosea 14:4** I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them graciously, for my anger has turned from them.

The two vocabularies show that what we call compassion must have the attitude of responsible love and untiring fidelity of *hesed*, and the completely gratuitous and unmerited motherly affection of *rahamim*. The implication of the meaning of these terminologies for life is rather deep. In Hebrew mentality, this innermost depth of a person is the womb, the seat in which life develops, in which it is preserved and protected, and from which it is born. Consequently, compassion has something to do with the development, preservation and nurturing of life.

A responsible and motherly love is caring, accountable, trustworthy, faithfully fulfilling the demands of a relationship already established, without counting the costs. Compassion is like the mother's instinct. A mother nurtures a child without expecting a reciprocal treatment from the child. A child is a mother's object of attention and care from birth to death. A mother's love knows no boundary and expects no invitation. The attitudes that define compassion embraces every situation in life, and not only a situation of lack or conflict.

In his book, *Compassion. A Reflection on the Christian Life*, Henri Nouwen (et al.) affirms that compassion is like an eraser

that removes the mistake of life, so it is "called upon when things get out of hand".<sup>2</sup> The vocabulary study undertaken here has revealed, however, that compassion's link to motherly love brings out all its diverse, all-life-embracing and rich meanings. It shows that compassion is not required only when things go wrong according to our human reckoning. When the human situation is seen in the light of God's plan of redemption, it would become obvious that even the best of situations need the touch of God's mercy to correspond to God's will. Compassion discovers the lacks and wants of life in order to enrich it. Every life situation needs compassion to sustain, to improve or to repair it. Compassion brings out the best in every situation.

Compassion is a word for relationship. We can appreciate the meanings of the concept that are derived from the terminology study above when they are properly situated within the history of the relationship between God and human beings.

### **3.2.2 Compassion in the God - Human Drama**

The story of compassion has deep roots reaching back to the creation of the world and to Israel's beginning. It is born out of God's struggle against evil on behalf of creation, and especially on behalf of weak, oppressed and suffering human beings.

---

<sup>2</sup>Henri Nouwen (et. al.), *Compassion. A Reflection on the Christian Life*, Doubleday: New York, 1982, p6.

Many times, the health of our interpersonal relationships depends on the positive reciprocal response of the individual partners. We are encouraged to go on with the relationship only if the other partner is collaborating and doing what he or she is supposed to do with regard to the terms of the relationship. Compassion impels God to operate according to a different logic. When we fail, God takes responsibility for our negative actions and thinks nothing except what he would do to repair our lacks.

From the beginning of God's relationship with human beings, God observed with regret and grief that every inclination of the thought of human heart was evil continually (Gen 6:5), meaning, that human ways are generated by a mindset that inspire actions which are detrimental to the good of communion. The remark in Gen 6:5 might sound negative, but within its context, it is an observation about the human condition which often moves God towards mercy. God decides, on the basis of this assertion, to uphold the relationship by taking personal responsibility of the effects of human frailty on the earth. Therefore, God vows through a covenant never again to curse the ground because of humankind. This implies that although the goal of creation is ordered towards realisation through human dominion (Gen 1:28), God assures the accomplishment of creation's goal even as the inclination of the human heart continues to be evil (cf. Gen 8:21-22).

From the time of Noah onwards, the relationship between God and human beings could continue only through the covenant, the covenant being God's way of inclining the human heart to obedience. It was not God's plan to leave human beings in their evil ways. They are created from the beginning to move gradually towards complete obedience to God's will. This situation led to the election of Israel. A people who would walk in God's ways and do His will. As in God's dealing with humanity, compassion also is located in the history of Israel as a sinful nation. It is found in the broad context of God's covenant, where God's compassion is revealed as special power of love, which overcomes the sin and infidelity of Israel, his chosen people.<sup>3</sup>

Israel became certain of God's gracious concern for them from the experience of the Exodus, when the Lord took the initiative to deliver the enslaved Israelites from bondage (Exod 3:7). Interpreting this experience the prophet Isaiah says, "...in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Is 63:9). From the time of the exodus, and throughout the time of the sojourn in the land, Israel remained a disobedient and stubborn people. The prophets describe the sin of Israel as a continuous turning away from God and walking according to their own devices, rejecting the plans of God (Is 65:2; Jer 2:13). In other words,

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 4.

the covenant people who had been schooled in the ways of God also suffered the misery of the human condition. As Israel lived out its gravest expression of sin against God in the worship of the Golden calf (Ex 34), God confronted their condition by recognizing the gravity of their sinfulness but rejecting to devour them in wrath. Rather, he revealed himself to them as merciful, forgiving and compassionate. The three words, *hesed*, *hen/hanan*, and *rahamim*, are found together in the description of this event in Exod 34:6-7, where God himself gives Moses a definition of Himself in these words:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful (*rahamim*) and gracious (*hanun*), slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*emeth*), keeping steadfast love (*hesed*) for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...

God was angry with his people and he would have destroyed them in his just anger, but he overcame his anger through compassionate love. God manifested compassion to Israel as unconditional fidelity; it is gracious love which is given even in spite of Israel's sin. Compassion gives God's justice a blend of restorative justice. Since God has given assurance of his mercy and readiness to forgive sins, Israel, in her entire history, continually entrusted herself to God's mercy, both during times of political misfortune and when faced with the reality

of her sin.<sup>4</sup>

This divine decision to uphold the cause of creation in spite of the human being is called compassion. On this hinges God's teaching on the relation between law and grace. This is the tap root out from which would grow a people living according to the values of the God who suffered the consequences of our sins by offering His life to save us, sinners. From this time onward, God began to teach human beings that the sanity of a community is restored through an act of self-giving for the unworthy others. This teaching is concretely and fully played out in the death of Jesus on the cross.

The experience of God's compassion left a lasting imprint in the life of Israel and throughout its history, it became for Israel the grounds for turning back and asking for mercy. The prophets describe God's compassion as a deep inner fire which brings out the 'godness' in God, an inner drive which overpowers him and conditions God's justice in a very profound way. Alongside other texts like Is 54:7 and Jer 31:20, Hosea 11:7-9 explains that compassion makes God's heart warm and tender in the face of Israel's sin. Israel's ongoing existence, in spite of sin, is thanks to God's nature as merciful and compassionate. God says in relation to Israel's sin,

---

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Ps 103 and 145; *John Paul II, Dives in Misericordia*, 4.

My people are bent on turning away from me... How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

The contemporary reader may not understand the referents, Admah and Zeboiim, but they seem to embody the meaning attached to a places like Sodom and Gomorrah, concrete examples of the consequence divine anger on sin. Hosea says in this text that Israel would have suffered the same fate if not thanks to God's compassion. Compassion compels God to renounce executing his just anger. It makes God's heart warm and tender. God's compassion embraces the entire human condition, made from dust and dependable on God for subsistence. Every stage of Israel's life experienced the touch of God's compassionate love from the exodus till the exile.

The image of a compassionate God enabled his people to turn to him in prayer. In the Psalter, which is the hymn book of Israel's worship, God's people made frequent appeal to God's compassion and steadfast love. The Hebrew word for compassion - *hesed* - occurs in more than fifty Psalms,<sup>5</sup> and in

---

<sup>5</sup>See especially Pss 59; 89; 106; 107; 118; 119.

every verse of Ps 136 especially, God's *hesed* is invoked as a safeguard, "for his mercy endures forever". God is praised and extolled for his compassion. Ps 78:37-39 is a typical song in praise of God's compassion in the face of Israel's unfaithfulness:

Their heart was not steadfast toward Him; they were not true to His covenant. Yet He, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often He restrained His anger, and did not stir up all His wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again.

Compassion describes the reality of gracious love for a people who are in need of restoration. Recognizing that they are a sinful people, Israel knows that God's compassion is the only safeguard for survival. In their experience through history, Israel came to know that God could be angry with them because of their stubbornness, but he cannot withdraw his compassion. This belief is expressed in many Psalms, especially in Ps 77 (especially vv6-9), which is a hymn in praise of God's holiness. Compassion is next to holiness because these two virtues together describe God as acting differently from humans (cf. Hos 11:7-9). In many of these Psalms, God is asked to act in Israel's favour for the sake of his own name and especially because he knows that Israel is



sinful, made from dust. For instance,

Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors; let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name's sake (Ps 79:8-9).

As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust (Ps 103:13-14).

Thanks to the mercy and compassion of God, the history of Israel which would have ended in disaster, turned out to be a history of salvation. This history of compassion in the OT prepares us for comprehending the fullest manifestation of compassion for the entire creation in the event of Jesus.

### **3.3 Compassion in the New Testament**

The highest expression of God's compassion in the history of salvation is the event of Jesus Christ. God became compassion incarnate in the historical reality of the man, Jesus. In other words, through his words and actions, Jesus gave fullest concrete expression to the compassion of God for human beings and for the world. As in our treatment of the concept in

the OT, the exposition of the nuance which compassion takes in the New Testament will be introduced with an exposition of the meaning of the terminology.

#### **3.3.1 The Meaning of the Vocabulary**

The Greek vocabulary for compassion, *splangchnizomai*, communicates the same meaning of the two Hebrew vocabularies. This Greek word derives from the word *splangchna*, which in English means backbone, guts, moral fibre or the entrails of the body. In the words of Henri Nouwen, this inner part of the body "is the place where our most intimate and intense emotions are located, the centre from which both passionate love and passionate hate grow, the fount of very deep and mysterious feeling".<sup>6</sup> The connection to the inner fibre of a person shows that compassion is not a superficial sentiment or emotion. It is a feeling that involves the person entirely because it comes from the innermost depths of that person.

#### **3.3.2 God's Compassion in Jesus**

In New Testament texts where the verb *splangchnizomai* describes Jesus' action, it is rightly translated as "to be moved with compassion" and this describes the inner drive of that deep feeling and how the feeling moved Jesus to action. Jesus was moved in his innermost being with compassion for a

---

<sup>6</sup>Nouwen, *Compassion*, p16.

helpless and harassed crowd without a shepherd (Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34), for the sick (Matt 14:14; 20:34), for the hungry (Matt 15:32; Mark 8:2), for the bereaved widow (Luke 7:13) and for the lost (Luke 17:20). In these texts, compassion describes Jesus as one who discovers the needs of others and responds to them with responsible devotion. When he discerned the people's need for enlightenment, he sat them down to teach them. When he saw the people's need for healing, for nutrition and for consolation, he responded accordingly. He did not wait to be asked. Compassion is an irresistible passion. No one can resist its inner drive.

One of the ways through which Jesus revealed the compassion of God is through his parables of the Kingdom of God. In his study of the parables, A.J. Hultgren classifies five of Jesus' parables as Parables of the Revelation of God because their central referent is God.<sup>7</sup> These are the parables of the Unforgiving Slave (Matt 18:23-35), the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), the Lost Sheep (Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-7), the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). These parables are characterised by delightful surprises and striking use of the hyperbole (exaggeration). The full meaning of the stories is also highlighted through bringing their elements and details into

---

<sup>7</sup>Cf. A.J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus. A Commentary*, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2000, pp20-89.

dialogue with the contemporary legal demands of the law. In the context of this dialogue with the demands of the law, one finds a deliberate use of the terminology of compassion in the stories which is designed to show how it is in the nature of compassion to exaggerate. Compassion goes beyond the medium of virtue and expresses the unexpected in God's dealing with human beings, while highlighting, at the same time, the extraordinary generosity of God's love.<sup>8</sup> Below is a presentation of some of these parables where the word 'compassion' occurs.

### ***3.3.2.1 The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant***

This parable describes compassion as God's extraordinary capacity to forgive. It is a dramatic presentation of all of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, especially in the Lord's Prayer. This parable was given in answer to a question that Peter addressed to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" (Matt 18:21). Forgiveness is an essential ingredient of compassion. In fact, a person with unforgiving spirit cannot be compassionate. This parable seems to underscore the importance of compassion for the health of any human community. By introducing the parable in v23 with the adverb 'therefore', Jesus gave further explanation to his answer to Peter's question by directing attention to God. The king in this parable is a metaphor of

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Hultgren, *Parables*, p20.

God.<sup>9</sup> Jesus seemed to be telling Peter, to look at God's dealing with human beings if he truly wanted to know what forgiveness means. In practical terms, to take God as model is what it means to forgive seventy times seven times (cf. Matt 18: 22).

According to the parable, God deals with us like a king who, on the day he came to settle accounts with his slaves, encountered one who owed him an exorbitant debt of 10,000 talents, and who could not pay. The only legal way to restore the relationship between creditor and debtor is through the restitution of debt in order to save the creditor from bankruptcy. Since the slave could not pay, the injunction of the law must take its course in favour of the sufferer, the creditor. In applying the legal prescription, the king ordered that the slave must be sold along with his wife, children and possessions in order to raise the money he owed. At the hearing of this sentence, the slave fell on his knees in desperation, appealing to the Master to be given more time to raise the money, even though what he owed was unimaginably too high for someone of his status. At this point, the parable says that the desperate situation of this slave moved the master to compassion and he released the slave from his debt. The verb *splanchnizomai* appears here in Matt 18:27 to designate the master's motivation for cancelling the entire

---

<sup>9</sup>The same holds for other parables of Jesus in Matt 22:2-14; 25:31-46

debt and releasing the slave. The slave was not simply granted what he requested, that is, additional time, but he was given the unexpected. This action of the king is an act of total and gracious liberation.

The story did not end with the master's total liberation of the slave. Forgiveness, by its very nature, is an event that attracts another. An experience of forgiveness is like the baton of a Relay Race which must be handed over to other participants in order to complete the race. The baton must be passed on to the next person. If you have ever been forgiven, the gift of forgiveness imposes a responsibility on you, that is, to forgive others as you have been forgiven. Exactly so, a part of the Lord's prayer says, "...and forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are indebted to us" (Luke 6:15).<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the master's dealing with his servant was only the first phase of a process which was meant to reach completion in the slave's treatment of other people. Unfortunately, what happened after this first phase of the event mirrors what human beings do with God's forgiveness. On leaving the master, it happened that this same slave met a colleague who owed him a reasonable sum of hundred talents. This fellow slave pleaded with him (Matt 18:29), just as devotedly as he had formerly done with his master (Matt 18:26). But he

---

<sup>10</sup>Other biblical texts that combine divine and human forgiveness are Sir 28:1-7; Mark 11:25; Matt 6:12.

refused to release his fellow slave. Ceasing him by the throat, he rigidly applied the prescriptions of the law by handing his fellow slave over to be sentenced and punished. In relation to the law, this slave was justified in his action towards his fellow slave. However, what should have determined his action is not law but he was expected to replicate his master's treatment of his own case. *'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'* (Matt 18:32-34). His inability to reciprocate his master's action earned him a reversal of his free condition. The process of forgiveness stopped at this stage, uncompleted and benefitting no one.

We must not also forget that an important characteristics of forgiveness is its gracious nature. The slave's total release from his debt was thanks to the master's initiative. The slave did not beg to be released of the debt. In order to be worthy of the name, forgiveness must be totally liberative and must begin from the initiative of the offended party. A different logic is operational in human relationship, where the offended party may forgive only after the offender had shown some willingness to change and have asked to be forgiven.

An implication of the gracious character of forgiveness is that the creditor suffers the consequence of the debt. The total release of the slave did not affect a miraculous restoration of the money that was owed. If the master offered a graceful

liberation, it means that he, the creditor, freely chose to suffer loss, and he suffered it in order to grant freedom to another who cannot pay. This gracious act does not disregard the demand for justice. Justice implies that a balance has to be established through the payment of a debt. This is done with the master's decision to suffer this loss on behalf of the other.

The two incidents allow us to compare between God's and human behaviour. Just as the king is a metaphor of God, the slave's unimaginable debt is the irreparable debt we human beings owe God, which we cannot repay and from which no human court could absolve us. The story shows the many ways in which human beings could respond to those who offend them or who owe them anything. Most often, our immediate reaction is anger and aggression, the exact opposite of the compassion of God. We reason it out logically, demanding from our fellows the logical and legal consequence of their actions. We are quick to invent disciplinary rules. We hand culprits over to those who have the power and authority to punish them, and once this is done, we are satisfied and we believe that justice has been done. But God's forgiveness is gratuitous, generous, unexpectedly real, liberating and totally restorative. We should pay attention to its gracious character, which is not a neglect of justice but a transfer of the consequence from the offender to the offended party, who generously accepts to suffer it. God's action teaches us to abandon our often tight-fisted and stingy attitudes toward

those who offend us. Sometimes, we may want to forgive, but we cannot let go completely. The offender should say 'I am sorry' and must show tangible signs of repentance before we grant amnesty. At the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus preached that the bedrock of his ministry is liberation that brings restoration and wholeness to human beings in their historical condition (Luke 4:18-19; 7:22-23). In his suffering and death, he truly paid the debts of human sin and thereby secured for them freedom and liberation.

This parable does not teach that God's forgiveness is conditional on our forgiving others. If this is so, then no one can ever merit divine forgiveness. In the context of general exhortation on Christian life in the Matthean community (Matt 18:1-35), the parable is the last part of the instruction on forgiveness (vv12-35). Its use of the term 'brother' (vv15,17,21) for a member of the Christian community underscores this context. The parable teaches that forgiveness is that action which God recommends as a means of repairing the brokenness of human relationships. Christians should open their minds to understanding it as a spiritual reality. The restoration and liberation that forgiveness brings is fruit of the sacrificial reparation which one is encouraged to make, because this is exactly how God obtained our liberation from sin. Through this parable, God is inviting every Christian to join in this work of restoring our brothers and sisters to their lost dignity. By reconciling us to

himself through the death of his Son, God has made all of us instruments of reconciliation, as Paul says in 2 Cor 5:17-20:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

### ***3.3.2.2 The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)***

This parable is also a story about God's compassion, and it describes God's extraordinary love for the lost (Luke 15:20). In the German language, it is called the 'Parable of the Lost Son'. It is found only in the Gospel of Luke, where it is the last among the cluster of other parables in Luke 15, which describe God's love for the lost. These are the Parables of the Lost Sheep (vv4-7) and the Lost Coin (vv8-10). Why did Jesus

tell this parable?

The three parables are Jesus' response to an accusation that he welcomes tax collectors and sinners and eats with them (vv1-2). So this parable is Jesus' response to the grumbling of those who disapprove of the way God lavishes (wastes) his gifts on the lost. The same situation led to the telling of the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke 18:9-14, addressed to those who prided themselves as righteous and who despised others. These stories which describe God's extra-ordinary love for the lost belong to the class of many stories in the Bible which give the right understanding of God and underscore the character of the Christian religion. Through them, Jesus tells us in dramatic ways what God loves to do and how he wants us to relate to others.

The parables are addressed to the Pharisees. The Pharisees, we must understand, are a very religious people. They loved and cared so much about the things of God and secured the preservation of Judaism during the times when Jewish faith was most threatened. But there is something wrong with Pharisaic spirituality which obscured the image of God, and this was what Jesus intended to address with these parables. Their efforts to safeguard religion through insistence on the application of punitive measures prescribed by the law obscured the image of a God who dies in order to reclaim what is lost. The parables of the lost sheep (found also in Matt

18:10-14) and the of the lost coin prepare the reader for the last parable, that of the lost son. These parables highlight the central figure of the parables, the Father, who is moved with compassion at the sight of a lost son. The story also highlight the gracious character of the Father's forgiveness and the immense joy involved in finding what is lost.

The three characters in the parable reveal to us so much about the state of our relationship with God. The younger son's request to have his share of the father's property while the latter is still alive is illegal, insolent and irresponsible. To wish to have what he should have got after the death of his father was tantamount to wishing the father's death. He took away what belongs to him and left to a distant country. Since he had taken all that belonged to him, he probably had no intention to return to the family. This son's sense of loss is described as a deliberate rejection of the father himself, or of his love and care, of the family and of his sonship, in place of his desire to live independently of any responsibility and authority.

We can see ourselves in the attitude of the Prodigal Son. Sometimes, selfish desires for independence and rejection of authority lead us to neglect our responsibilities towards the religious community and submission to authority. This trend is fast growing and its consequences on religious life is great. We very easily demand for our rights and love to live the way we want. We may read his sense of loss from Matthew's

perspective in its description of the parable of the Lost Sheep. Matthew says that the sheep 'has gone astray' (Matt 18:12,14), probably, misled by others or by wrong ideas. Luke says he lived a wild and disorderly life (Luke 15:13), defying parental control and legal substructure of society.

The son's geographical distance from his father and loss of sonship meant more than emotional and psychological distance from the father. He was cut off from the support and protection of the father. This explains what happened to him after a famine struck the city where he went to. He began to be in want. His state of want led him to the worst deprivation and humiliation; not only was he employed to feed pigs, which was deplorable for Jews, he suffered hunger and was not even allowed to eat from what was given to pigs. This is the climatic stage of his sense of loss. His state of destitution led him to recover his senses. He needed to return to his father.

The lost son's coming to his senses (Luke 15:17) meant that he came to full consciousness of who he was, and saw the disparity between that and what he has become. His wild and disorderly life was the result of loss of self knowledge. He must return to the Father. He knew he had lost all legal rights to the Father's protection and love, no right to sonship, and not to anything. So he was ready to ask for the minimum, to become a slave, a nobody.

The second character is the father. While the prodigal son was still far off, his father saw him... (Luke 15:20). Even though the younger son's behaviour was irresponsible, insolent and illegal, the father had not given up on him. He might have spent years of the son's absence watching out for his return. This could explain why he saw him from the distance. The picture of the son which he saw moved him to compassion (v20). Compassion swept him off his feet. He ran, he embraced his son and kissed him. While the son was confessing his sin and his unworthiness, the father was ordering the servants to restore all that were his before he abandoned home: sonship, royalty and a welcome home feast. The gracious character of the father's reception of the repentant son is very touching. The same picture is painted of the shepherd that found his lost sheep and of the woman that recovered the lost coin. All three parables are characterized by a sense of joyous merriment and the invitation of others to share in the joy of the one who discovers what was lost.<sup>11</sup> Like the shepherd and the woman who lost her coin, the Father invites others to share in his joy. These are those who rejoice with God, who do not grumble, but accept the ways of God, sharing His joy over the recovery of what was lost.

The third character is the eldest son (vv25-32). He is introduced as an obedient, respectful, hardworking, morally

---

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Hultgreen, *The Parables*, p59

good and responsible man who had legal right to his father's possession. He has the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees who obeyed God's law but have a distorted view of God. As he approached home from the field, the sound of rejoicing made him angry and he refused to join the party. He grumbled because the father received his prodigal son with opened arms and restored his sonship. He had long renounced every kinship relation to his brother, whom he now addressed as 'this son of yours...who has devoured your property with prostitutes' (v30). His anger against the father led him even to lose the sense of his own dignity as son and heir; so he described his obedience as a form of enslavement to the father (v29). The father's efforts to change his views proved unsuccessful. The story leaves the reader bewildered that after many years of obedient service, the righteous son ended up not joining the banquet. As Luke had said at the beginning of the parable, it is Jesus' warning to righteous individuals who grumble at the way Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2).

As in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, this parable also closes with an application in the life of the hearers. While the Lucan account underscores the greater joy of God in finding what was lost (Luke 15:7), the Matthean version of the story emphasizes above all else, what the will of God is: "it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matt 18:14). Matthew means that God was

prepared to do whatever it takes to find and bring home any one of his children who was lost. In Jesus, God's efforts to find what is lost led him to self immolation. This meaning is in line with the prophetic critique of Israel's leaders who neither brought back the strayed nor sought out what was lost (Ezek 34:4). Moreover, the shepherd's tireless search for one lost sheep out of a hundred casts light on his love for each one of his sheep, even when he could in fact get along without it. According to Hultgreen, in the Oriental setting in which the parable is told, the action of the shepherd in leaving the ninety-nine as he goes in search of one may be described as untypically extravagant, risky and/or irresponsible. However, the reader must not be distracted with other unexplained details of the story, but should concentrate on its central focus, that is, the seeking of the lost.<sup>12</sup> The point is very clearly made: the loss of one is a dreadful calamity. God cannot give up and does not give up on anybody. These parables leave a vivid message to the Christian community, that is, the leader of the community should hold every member as very dear, and should seek out any who have strayed or is lost. "Restoration, not excommunication" is the imperative.<sup>13</sup> It is a requirement of compassion.

Another parable of the revelation of God is found in Matt 20:1-16, the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. Similar to the

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hultgreen, *The Parables*, p53-54.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hultgreen, *The Parables*, p55.



parables that are discussed here, it is also characterized by a surprise and the unexpected in God's dealing with human beings, while highlighting, at the same time, the extraordinary generosity of God for those who do not deserve it. As in the other parables too, it also includes a warning and a moral teaching: So the last will be first, and the first will be last (v16). All these parables emphasize the importance of understanding God's ways and his plan of salvation, which is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Although God dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16), and human beings cannot fully comprehend him, Jesus has made known to us the most profound mystery of the Father's relationship of love for humanity.<sup>14</sup> "He has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ" (Eph 1:9). God's will and purposes are a mystery because they are beyond human understanding. Even after being revealed, they still do not correspond to the way human beings reason and act. God's invisible nature becomes most visible in the life of Christ, in a particular way in his revelation of God as the Father who is rich in mercy.<sup>15</sup> God's infinite mercy is revealed especially in the mystery of the Incarnation.

### **3.4 The Incarnation: The Highest Expression of God's Compassionate Love**

The mystery of the Incarnation is the event of God which every

---

<sup>14</sup> John 1:18; Tit 3:4.

<sup>15</sup> Eph 2:4; Cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 2.

Christian is invited to understand and live out in daily life. The Incarnation is the self-humiliating love of God for human beings, whose depth is incomprehensibly baffling and terrifying. In order to describe the depth and power of this love, St Paul says "He emptied himself" of His godhead and assumed the condition of a slave. A slave is the lowest grade in the social classification of human beings. He assumed the worst condition of the human being. Jesus described his work as a ministry of slavery. According to Bishop Godfery M. P. Okoye, 'he emptied himself' describes that love that moved God to be incarnate in order to become man and then to suffer and die and rise again for us,

all that love is what you are called upon to give response to and pay love for love. Love of Christ as it is found in God Himself and as it is revealed to us men and as it is incarnate in our Lord Jesus Christ...His love for me urged Him to sacrifice Himself for me, to immolate Himself, he suffered. He forgave all his enemies, rather, he showed them kindness and love...His love for us drew him to self-emptying redemptive service...<sup>16</sup>

Having explained how we are called to give adequate response to this love that is revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation,

---

<sup>16</sup> Bishop Godfery MaryPaul Okoye, *Talks to His Daughters*, vol. 1, p19.

Bishop Okoye enjoined us to examine how we treat and look upon those who offend us, whether our love is like the one revealed by Jesus in how he treated his enemies, how he loved them, did not wish them evil; we should examine if our love is generous, compassionate, condescending, kind, forgiving, and so on. He added, "These are the things you are to learn and meditate. This is your vocation...that is the type of love you are to have - the love that Christ showed and exhibited towards us sinners. 'Love one another as I have loved you'".<sup>17</sup>

The reality of sin and suffering as part of the worldly condition shows compassion as God's provision of means for alleviating the pains of human beings in the world. Compassion is at the heart of God's dealing with human beings in the world, and through it, God reveals to human beings how they could support one another in their relationships. Every remedy to the human condition in the world is already made known in Jesus who fully reveals man to himself and brings to light the elevated vocation of the human person.<sup>18</sup> This description of God's dealing with the world enables us to see him particularly as close to human beings, in their shortcomings, sufferings and anxieties. All the parables of the revelation of God that are discussed above express a concern which needs to be given some attention, that is, the relationship between compassion and legal justice.

<sup>17</sup> Bishop Godfrey MaryPaul Okoye, *Talks to His Daughters*, vol.1, p19.

<sup>18</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

### **3.5 Relationship between Compassion and Legal Justice**

Some of the most recurring questions which arise from the definition of compassion as a gracious action in favour of the sinner concern the place of law and justice in the ordering of relationships and in the society. The parables told in favour of the debtor, the disobedient and the lost seem to disregard legal matters that are important for the restitution of justice in relationships and of the society. Is compassion an exhibition of sentimental permissiveness that leads to social disorder? Does compassion encourage lawlessness? Does it encourage a neglect of justice which is conducive of civil unrest and enmity, and detrimental to the harmony of the society? The answer is a capital 'No'. To the contrary, compassion does not neglect justice; rather, it recognizes the law's prescription, interacts with it and gives it a blend of restorative justice.

The understanding of compassion as a gracious safeguard for life does not result in a denial of the central importance of the law for the proper ordering and organization of any human society. It must be admitted that the relationship between compassion and legal justice is not a characteristic of most human societies, not even of some societies that define themselves as religious. This is because it is not easy for the leadership of a human society to address incidents of tensions, crises or disorder in a society without the help of, and appeal to law. Most times, however, the passionate need to punish

offenders in order to restore order may result in inflexible administering of that law, and this could turn out to be oppressive. Therefore, it must be affirmed that the kind of compassionate action - which alone can safeguard an ordered society against human passion and against a rigid administration of justice that punished the law breaker and the sinner - cannot be a matter of law alone.

Although defined as an action that is gracious, compassion does not operate against the law and its principles, but it works to achieve the goal of the law by influencing the form that the law assumes, according to the ideals of the Christian religion. For instance, one of the goals of Christian religion is expressed in one saying of Jesus that *it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish* (Matt 18:14; Ezek 18:23, 32). Many parables of Jesus have shown that God expends many gracious efforts to recover the sinner, in order to put him or her back on track. Such goal of Christian life, expressed in favour of the sinner, would determine how the law should be applied to achieve its intent, that is, not according to human definition of justice, but according to the mind of God who desires to recover what is lost. Another instance could be drawn from Jesus' own application of the Sabbatical law. The Sabbatical law is intended to ensure the orthodox worship of God in imitation of his acts in history. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, his contemporaries accused him of breaking the law of the Sabbath which forbids

any work on this day consecrated to God and to his service. In his defence of his actions, Jesus meant that the true worship which human beings could give to God is a faithful imitation or commemoration of God's own actions which are essentially liberative. Therefore, the reason for which Jesus healed on the Sabbath was to imitate God in liberating God's children who are held captive by sin and sickness. This is why he said that "the Sabbath is made for man and not man for Sabbath" (Matt )

The hope of any Christian community of maintaining a compassionate order within the institutional demands of the law derives from having the imitation of God's actions as the guiding principle of every action and every decision. Without God as model of every action and decision, human beings are prone to acting according to their natural inclinations, which is detrimental to the goal of communion. Only the model of God's action could provide a basis for an understanding of the meaning of the relationship between law and gospel, between justice and grace, an understanding capable of saving us from narrow-minded spirituality, which does not see things from the perspective of God's plan of salvation.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The stories of Jesus' act of compassion leaves us with two possibilities of response. Firstly, we must respond with thanksgiving to God who sees and discovers our needs and who respond to them out of his merciful initiative. Our second

response is a missionary obedience to God's call to us to be agents of divine compassion for the world. The vocabulary of compassion reveals to us the source of the stories of healing and miracles that Jesus worked. Those miracles were not simple demonstrations of power, but they reveal the source of that power, that is, the irresistible inner drive of God's love for human beings.

## *Chapter Three*

### *Cultivating Compassion: A Necessary Tool for our Vocation to Love*

*By Sr M. Chizoba Ekeh*

---

#### **1. Introduction**

I begin this reflection with Anthony De Mello's story on benevolence:<sup>1</sup>

*A grocer came to the Master in great distress to say that across the way to his shop, they had opened a large chain store that would drive him out of business. His family had owned his shop for a century – and to lose it now would be his undoing, for there was nothing else he was skilled at. Said the Master: 'if you fear the owner of the chain store, you will hate him; and hatred will be your undoing'. "What shall I do?" said the distraught grocer, "Each morning, walk out of your shop on to the sidewalk and bless your shop, wishing it prosperity. Then turn to face the chain store and bless it too". "What? Bless my competitor and destroyer?" "Any blessing you give him will rebound to your good. Any evil you wish him will destroy you". After six months the grocer returned to report that he had to*

---

<sup>1</sup>One Minute Wisdom, Gamdi-Anand: Anand Press, 1992, p131.