

# COMPASSION: THE SOURCE OF LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY: Some reflections on the Parable of the Good Samaritan

by Terry Collins

What is it precisely that makes the difference between the Good Samaritan and the other characters of the story we read in chapter 10 of Luke's gospel? The clue to the answer seems to lie in the verbs used to describe people's actions in the parable. The priest and the Levite both "saw" and then "passed by". In contrast to them, the Samaritan "saw" and "was moved" by what he saw to do something about it. Instead of "passing by", he "went towards" the man in distress and "treated his wounds". The difference between him and the others comes down to the fact that they have different inner responses to something that both he and they can see.

"Being moved" to make an inner response to what we see, is in fact quite a complex process, even though it may take just a few seconds for our decision to go one way or the other. First of all, we have to have eyes that are open to see. Secondly, there must be an instinctive reaction, summed up in the phrase "being moved with compassion". This is a basic gut reaction rather something that is reasoned or calculated. Thirdly, we must be willing to let ourselves be moved to action by that feeling which we could quite easily suppress. The inner voice can always be made to shut up.

The key line in the parable of the Good Samaritan is the one that says: "and when he saw him he had compassion and went to him". The word "compassion" is very significant in Biblical language. Words like "compassion" or "mercy" crop up in various forms in all kinds of contexts, especially in the Old Testament. The vocabulary is important because it is closely related to the theological view that God is a being who is "merciful, gracious and slow to anger" as in Exodus 34.6 and Psalms 145.8; 86.15; 111.4. The vocabulary merits a closer inspection.

Hebrew, like English, has a number of terms which it can make use of to describe this quality in God or in people. The two principal words are the adjectives *raham* = "merciful", "compassionate" and *hanun* = "kind", "gracious", together with their related verbs and nouns. Strictly speaking *raham* is connected to the word for womb and intestines, and so logically it is associated with the inner feeling or "gut reaction" of pity. By contrast, *hanun* is more concerned with the kind deeds one does as a result of the inner feeling. However the distinction between the two is not always strictly maintained. At times, they even seem to be interchangeable. Consequently, we can also note here a certain amount of variation and inconsistency in the ways modern translators match up the Hebrew vocabulary with the synonyms available in English:- pity, mercy, compassion, kindness etc. But that is not really important.

A third Hebrew word involved is the verb *hamal*, which is associated with the idea of showing mercy by sparing someone who would otherwise die. Pharaoh's daughter in Ex 2.6 has mercy on the crying infant Moses. The Babylonian soldiers in 2 Chron 36.17, on the other hand, show no such pity for the young men during the fall of Jerusalem. There is also a rarer verb *hus* which is used to indicate the feeling of pity which makes one ready to weep for somebody. Finally, there is the very common word *hesed* which carries a whole range of meanings related to covenant faithfulness, including that of "loving mercy" or "kindness". We can note at this point how all of these words have overtones of superiority in the one who is showing mercy. The sort of "compassion" or "mercy" they refer to is a discretionary act of generosity exercised by one who has power over another, usually the power of life or death. It is an attribute of someone in authority, a king or an overlord who can choose to be magnanimous when victorious in battle, or merciful when pronouncing judgement on those who have transgressed, or kind and generous to those who are well behaved. When applied to God, this sort of language underlines his authority, his majesty, his absolute power and his unimpeachable justice. Those who receive God's mercy have reason to be grateful; those who do not receive it have no grounds for complaint or criticism.

These ideas and the associated vocabulary are widespread in the OT and they carry over into the New Testament. The canticles of Mary and Zechariah in Luke 1 are obvious examples of the bridge between the two, and in them we find phrases such as: "He who is mighty has mercy on those who fear him (1.50), he helps his servant Israel, remembering his mercy (1.54), to perform the mercy promised to our fathers" (1.72). Other examples are found in the Letter of James 5.11, which invites the readers to reflect on examples from the scriptures which show that God is compassionate and merciful and in Romans 9.22-23, where Paul talks about "vessels (= recipients) of wrath and vessels of mercy". In Rom 11.31 mercy is shown to the disobedient, and in 15.9, the gentiles glorify God for the mercy he has shown in Christ. These passages are clearly influenced by the OT tradition, and so before looking at the language of the Good Samaritan story, we would be advised to look again at that tradition as it is expressed in the Greek version of the OT, since this was the version of the scriptures that probably influenced the NT writers most. This could be a vast topic for study, but we can limit ourselves here to the question of whether the linguistic evidence shows that the "compassion" of the Good Samaritan is the same as the "mercy and compassion" of God in the OT. Or is it something different?

Just like Hebrew and English, Greek has a number of words at its disposal to talk about "mercy and compassion", and those who translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek were not always too fussy about which one they used.

**First**, there is the noun *eleos* or its verb form *eleo*, which is familiar to most people in the form of *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord have mercy". In the Greek OT, it is used to translate both *rahum* and *hanun*, and it may refer either to the feeling of pity or to the action of showing mercy or kindness. It is associated with the act of almsgiving, and so once again it highlights the difference between the superior giver and the inferior recipient.

**Secondly** there is the verb *oiketeiro* which means to have pity on or to feel sorry for someone, and which in classical Greek is often used in the sense of expressing pity by wailing over someone's misfortunes. In the Greek bible it is used to translate either *rahum* or *hanun* (feelings or actions).

**Thirdly**, there is the verb *phaidomai*, which means to spare something or someone, for example to refrain from destroying a place or a population in time of war. In the Greek Bible, it means to feel pity and to show mercy, and it is used to translate *hamal*, as in the case of Pharaoh's daughter or the Babylonian soldiers mentioned above.

Given the existence of this established vocabulary relating to divine mercy and compassion, it is rather surprising to find that Luke decides not to use any of these words when describing the actions of the Good Samaritan (a decision which does not come across in the English translations). When Luke says that the Samaritan was moved to compassion, he opts for an entirely different verb *splangchnizomai*. This contrasts with his choice of words in the canticles of Mary and Zechariah, where he uses the traditional Greek Bible vocabulary based on *eleos* to refer to God's merciful deeds.

The idea that Luke, in the story of the Good Samaritan, is trying to put across a very special message is confirmed when we see that he uses the same sort of language in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In chapter 15, the father sees his son at a distance, he is moved to compassion (*esplangchnisthe*), he runs towards him and embraces him. The impression is reinforced even further when we note that this same language is used to describe Jesus' own behaviour in Luke 7. Jesus meets the funeral cortege coming out of Nain. He sees the grieving widowed mother, "And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her (*esplangchnisthe*), and said to her 'Do not weep'. And he came and touched the bier. . ." (7.13-14). The sequence of seeing, being moved with compassion, going towards and touching is common to all three instances in Luke's gospel, and in each of them we meet the word *splangchnizomai*. This is hardly the result of mere coincidence.

This feature is not restricted to Luke. In Matthew and Mark, the sequence of seeing-responding-acting is related to Jesus' healing ministry. For example, in Matthew's version of the blind men who called out to Jesus on the road to Jericho asking to be healed, we read: "having pity on them (*splangchnistheis*), Jesus

touched their eyes and immediately they received their sight" (Matt 20.) In Mk 9.22, the father of the possessed boy pleads with Jesus, "If you can do anything, have pity in us (splingchnistheis) and help us". Jesus then casts out the devil and the boy falls to the ground as if dead. "But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up", just as he did to the son of the widow of Nain.

Prior to the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew's account, we are told: "As he went ashore, he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them (esplingchnisthe) and healed their sick" (14.14). In Mark's version, the compassion is related to Jesus' ministry of preaching the word of God: "As he landed he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them (esplingchnisthe) because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mk 6.34). This leads into the scene of the feeding of the multitude, with its overtones of bread in the wilderness. This in turn evokes Deuteronomy which asserts that "man does not live by bread alone but from every word that proceeds from the mouth of God". The link is underlined in Mark 8, which reports the feeding of the four thousand and initiates the scene with Jesus' words: "I have compassion (splingchnizomai) on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat" (Mk 8.2 and Matt 15.32)

In Matthew 9.35-38, the same saying is presented as the basis for the whole of Jesus' mission of healing and preaching and by extension it is the source of the mission of his disciples whom he sends out to do the same: "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and infirmity. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them (esplingchnisthe), because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." After which, Jesus calls his twelve disciples and sends them out on their mission.

What are we to conclude from all this? I would suggest there are two main points :- Firstly, when we take all these passages together, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that the gospel writers have made it as plain as they could that in their view the response of "being moved with compassion" plays a crucial role in the ministry of Jesus and consequently in that of his followers. Secondly, since they use a special verb (splingchnizomai) which is distinct from the Greek OT vocabulary about God's mercy and compassion, it is important for us to find out what exactly is implied in that word.

The verb *splingchnizomai* is based on the noun *splingchna*. which refers to the all vital organs of the human body - the heart, the liver and the intestines taken together. It is a way of referring to a person's whole inner being in very physiological terms. It is very human language, as is evident in Paul's Letter to Philemon: "I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts (*splingchna*) of the saints have been refreshed through you" (7); and "Yes, brother, I want a favour from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart (*splingchna*) in Christ" (20). This is the language of personal relationships between equals, and it is very relevant to the Christian understanding of "brotherly" love. As John writes: "But if someone who has this world's goods sees his brother in need and still closes his heart (*splingchna*) against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3.17)

From this we can see that the New Testament's assertion that Jesus "was moved with compassion" (*esplingchnisthe*) is tied to his humanity. It is part of the physiology of being human. Consequently, it underlines the humanity of Jesus which is manifested in the compassion he feels for others. In one place Mark goes even further and says that Jesus felt real anger (*orgistheis*) at the sight of human suffering in the shape of a leper (Mk 1.41). He is ready to feel for and to suffer with ordinary people, alongside them rather than standing aloof and operating at a distance. This is incarnational language, presenting a theological view of "God at ground level". We are dealing with the mystery of the Mission of the Word Incarnate, and it is that mission which is the basis for all other particular missions, whether of the Church as a whole or of individual Christians or specific groups within the Church.

Being "moved to compassion" is a key element in any mission or ministry that claims to be Christian. Christian discipleship is not something based on superiority and authority over others. The mission that goes

with it presupposes a shared humanity and a willingness to be motivated by feelings of "com-*passion*". It calls for *splangchna.as* as an essential prerequisite.

Bringing things nearer to home and trying to understand our vocation as Christian Educators today, we can say that "being moved with compassion" has to be the starting point for our Lasallian mission, because it is the starting point for Christ's own mission and that of all his disciples. Compassion was the starting point of De La Salle's mission. As he puts it so movingly, "It happens frequently that young people have not the strength of mind or body to carry the burdens that often crush them." Compassion was the source of his inspiration, as it must be today for all the new forms of "mission" and "association for the mission" that are developing today in the Church generally and in the Lasallian world in particular.

The idea was stated very forcefully by Brother Alvaro, the Superior General, in his address to the mixed gathering of Lay Lasallians and Brothers in November 2000 for the Colloquium on "Associating for the Lasallian Mission".

"Our Institute was born in the face of a process of dehumanisation, in a world where young people were far from salvation and had no chance of reaching their full potential as human beings and Christians. If we today are to be faithful to that original charism, we must "associate for the one mission" and respond creatively in the face of new forms of dehumanisation, new forms of poverty, in response to cries for help coming to us from the excluded."