



The Christ of compassion

In a brilliant article on the emotional life of Jesus, B.B. Warfield states that *'it belongs to the truth of our Lord's humanity, that he was subject to all sinless human emotions'* (*Person and Work of Christ*, p. 93). That we should know anything about the emotions of Jesus is a wonderful mystery.

Indeed, it is two great mysteries. That the Lord should have human emotions at all is wonderful in itself. He took a life which by nature did not belong to him and assumed our human nature in order to redeem it. The wonder of the incarnation meant that Jesus took to himself a body and a soul. He became like us physically and rationally, and all without sin.

Charles Hodge reminds us that *"everything that can be predicated of man (that is, of man as man, and not of man as fallen) can be predicated of Christ"* (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 380). In other words, he had perfect human emotions which he expressed perfectly. He felt anger, but it was not inordinate. He knew joy, but it did not carry him away. He felt grief, but did not become introspective. He felt sorrow, but did not become depressed. All of Christ's emotions were God-glorifying, God-centered, and God-absorbed. There was no irrationality in them, no confusion, and no self-centeredness.

The second wonder is that we can know anything about this. How, for example, did John know that Jesus' came to Lazarus's tomb groaning? Or that on occasions he felt aggrieved? The answer that Jesus himself supplies is that the Holy Spirit revealed and recalled these things to the Gospel writers when the time came for them to leave us a permanent record of all that Jesus did and taught. How wonderful it is that we can take up the Bible and find such a Saviour on its pages! May we never lose the sense of wonder and amazement that this written word should give us such unparalleled and unique access to the living, incarnate Word!

As we consider four areas regarding the emotional life of Jesus, let's pray for an increasing sense of wonder that Jesus became like us; and let's also pray for an increasing measure of grace so that, even in the affections of our heart, we will become like him.

We are going to look, first, at the Christ of compassion. According to B.B. Warfield, compassion is the emotion most frequently applied to Jesus in the Gospels (*Person and Work of Christ*, p. 96). That is hardly surprising, given his mission and its implications. His was a mercy-work, in which he came to offer the only hope that a world lost in sin could have. His work was fuelled by obedience, certainly, but it was also motivated by compassion.

There is no incongruity or asymmetry between these motives. Christ's meat and drink was to do the Father's will (John 4:34), as one who came down from Heaven to do the will of him who sent him (John 6:37). But duty was not the only compelling factor. Indeed, Christ made it clear that his walking the path of obedience was intended to show how much he loved the Father (John 14:31). He also fulfilled his obligations as the Servant of Jehovah willingly and gladly as one who entered a fallen world, with a compassion and a love for the lost.

The point is made explicit in Luke 7:13, where Jesus met a funeral procession. A widow woman was burying her only son. Luke tells us that *'when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her'*. Jesus is going to give much to this widow: he will give her words of comfort, the revelation of his glory in the miracle, and a reason to give praise to God. The important point is that the spring of all that he does is said to be his 'compassion'. The word that Luke uses is related to the Greek word for our internal organs, used metaphorically to refer to the seat of our affections.

That is why, for example, we have the frequent use in the Old Testament, especially in older translations, of the word 'bowels' to refer to our deepest emotions and affections. The very word indicates a strong internal action: from the very depths of his being, Christ is moved for this woman in this situation, and his actions arise out of his deep emotions. As Bishop J.C. Ryle put it, "*He waits not to be applied to for help. His help appears to have been neither asked for nor expected*" (Luke, Vol. 1, p. 209). Instead, the action is spontaneous, and flows out of his own heart.

Warfield makes an interesting point when he tells us that John never uses this word for 'compassion'. He says:

It is characteristic of John's Gospel that it goes with simple directness always to the bottom of things. Love lies at the bottom of compassion. And love is attributed to Jesus only once in the Synoptics, but compassion often; while with John the contrary is true – compassion is attributed to Jesus not even once, but love often.

(*Person and Work of Christ*, p. 102)

Inasmuch as that is so, we ought to emphasise the fact that Jesus had a human heart of love for his friends and for his companions. This comes out very clearly in the narrative surrounding the death of Lazarus, where we are told that the one Jesus loved was sick (John 11:3), and that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 11:5). Jesus was tied in the bonds of human affection and love to those who would be closest to him in this world. On a natural level, his affections and emotions were entirely similar to ours.

So we find that Jesus has a heart of love, which, in the context of a world of sin, death and sorrow, became a heart of compassion. And that compassion is referred to in a variety of different contexts.

Sometimes, as in Luke 7, Jesus has compassion towards individuals who are in critical situations in their lives. Mark 1:41-45 talks of a leper whom Jesus healed. The miraculous restoration to health arises out of this one simple, yet profound consideration of Jesus: "*Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him*". This was in response to the plea of the leper, "*If you will, you can make me clean*". Similarly, Matthew 20:29-34 tells of what happened when two men cried out to Jesus, "*Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!*" The response was as follows: "*Jesus, in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him*".

In other cases, the compassion was more general, focussing on the needs of a sin-laden generation. In the account of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30-44, for instance, we read that compassion was the spring out of which the miracle occurred: "*when he went ashore he saw a great crowd and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd*" (verse 34). Interestingly, this pity, love and compassion resulted, first, in Jesus teaching them and, second, in Jesus feeding them.

Matthew 9:35-6 also highlights this same feeling of pity and compassion:

'And Jesus went throughout all their cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.'

In this summary statement, Matthew is reinforcing the point that compassion was the source for the entire ministry, teaching and healing, of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was not only moved by what he saw of the physical needs of people, such as their need for food and for healing; his compassion arose out of his understanding of what it was that lay behind these needs. The situation of the people was not merely to be explained in terms of these observable phenomena and facts (they were tired and diseased and hungry), but in terms of the root cause of which these things were merely symptoms.

Jesus saw a hungry person; but he did not merely feel sorry for someone without food. He saw a sick person, but did not merely pity someone who was in ill-health. He saw tired people, but did not

merely have compassion for someone who had not had enough sleep. His compassion was not merely the result of his sight, but of his insight into the root cause of these conditions. And of the root cause he had no doubt: hunger, tiredness, sickness and death were all the consequence of sin's entry into the world. As he looked at a broken humanity struggling in the cross-currents of a fallen world, Jesus was moved with compassion because these sheep were destitute of a shepherd.

This is brought to clear focus as we see how a sight of stubborn, unbelieving Jerusalem leaves the Lord in tears. So Luke 19:41 tells us that 'when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it.' And at last the cross is the measure of Jesus' compassion. As he puts it himself, "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). The death he died is the measure of the love he had and of the compassion that moved him. The implications of that are staggering.

What about us? What does this demonstration of the compassion of Christ say to us? On what levels ought it to challenge us?

First, have we seen ourselves as those in need of the Saviour's compassion? We have brought ourselves into reduced and straitened circumstances by our sin. What a blessing that the Saviour we worship and serve has not rejected such an impoverished world! When Jesus looks at us, does he weep over our stubbornness, or does he see a positive response to his mission mercy of salvation?

Second, what do we see when we look out at a fallen world? Can we remain unmoved? Where are our priorities? Have we stopped weeping over sin, over a society that has lost its way and is drifting further and further away from God? And are we prepared to act in grace, taking the initiative, as Christ himself did, to help those who are in need?

If we are truly his followers, with hearts like his, then we cannot remain unmoved by a lost world. How far are we willing to go to develop the same sense of Christ-like compassion and pity for a world lying in sin?

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