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ON THE DRY SIDE 417

Compassion

John Hyde

But whoso has this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? (1 John, iii, 17)

Christmas celebrates the earthly birth of a divine being, who having no need to do such things, nevertheless, chose to suffer with mankind. It is the beginning of a great story about 'compassion'---God's compassion for man. I am a religious skeptic, but even a skeptic can have no doubt about the didactic power of the Christian story.

That story, like so many others, is being stripped of its power, however, by the watering down of its central language. Powerful words, such as compassion, are losing those connotations which make serious demands of the people who use them. Marvin Olasky, writing for the Heritage Foundation, on the occasion of Christmas 1989, looked hard at 'compassion' for us.

'Compassion' is derived from two Latin words: 'com', with; and 'pati', suffering. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) provides this first meaning: 'Suffering together with another, participation in suffering'. It also gives us a second meaning: 'The feeling, or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another and by the desire to relieve it....' The first meaning is strong, connoting action with cost. The second is a feeling. The Christian story is entirely about the first meaning. A story that, instead, told us that God was moved emotionally by human suffering, or even that he ordered an archangel to fix things, would teach us very little.

Webster's dictionary, under the influence of modern American liberalism, has shifted gradually from the first OED definition to this definition: 'deep feeling for and understanding of misery or suffering and a concomitant desire to promote its alleviation'. Today, without abusing the

language as defined by Webster, a politician can make a compassionate speech that does not cut a cent from his salary or reduce the quality of his Scotch. Plays and novels can be described as 'compassionate' if they deal in some way with unfortunate aspects of the human condition. A judge who sentences lightly can be described as 'compassionate'. Governments that use other peoples' money to subsidise poverty---but only among voters---talk endlessly and sickeningly of 'compassionate' government. And so on. 'Com pati' has almost disappeared from the meaning of the word.

What word/s are we to use to tell the Christian story then? How do we describe Mother Teresa, the Little Sisters of the Poor, people who choose to live and die with the world's persecuted peoples, the voluntary staff in women's refuges, the soldier who risks his life for another, and so on? A Thesaurus is not much help---none of 'pitying', 'sympathetic', 'understanding', 'lenient', or 'forgiving' will do the job.

Those do-gooders who want the respect due to one who 'suffers with' but none of the inconvenience of actually suffering with anybody, let alone anything as extreme as dying on a cross, have changed the language rather than admit that the world has people who are their moral superiors. One does not become a good Samaritan by feeling sympathy: one has to do something at personal cost. As for the people who really are compassionate in the active rather than the emotional sense: I doubt that they use the word at all, certainly not about themselves.

Chatterers, such as Olasky and I, however, need a good strong word. Without it, how are we to write anything but mush about such morally-laden issues as Christmas and Christians, and unpaid social work? Bishops face the same problem. Is it because they no longer have access to the vocabulary that can retell the Christian story of personal sacrifice on behalf of the downtrodden that they generalise about child poverty and mouth economic nonsense about interest rates? (I am not suggesting that in the recent contretemps the Prime Minister was any less nonsensical than Bishop Hollingsworth.)

Once we accept what is undoubtedly the Christian view---namely, that compassion cannot be delegated---expressions such as 'the compassionate society' are seen to be hollow. And the majority of us, who have the ability to give rather than to take, lose the benefit of an easy cop-out. We can no longer salve our consciences while avoiding any serious 'suffering with'. That may be an uncomfortable thought, but there we are!

We also find ourselves faced with an unpalatable explanation (or part explanation) of the fact that ills such as child poverty have increased (or apparently increased) with the growth of the welfare state. We, unlike our grandparents, no longer feel obliged to care for snotty-nosed orphans and deserted children. Too many of us even desert our own children/parents, saying that our taxes will pay for their upkeep. Somewhere along the line, our envy has replaced our charity---we don't voluntarily give up much of our time or run

many risks for others, indeed we will not inconvenience ourselves much at all for others. But we will make damned certain that the other bloke does! What is more, we will take whatever the welfare state allows us and remind our politician that his re-election is conditional on it being plenty.

The Christian church did not survive almost 2000 years by peddling that sort of easy virtue. Indeed its decline might be attributable, at least in part, to the fact that being a modern Christian is not much of a challenge. Now, I have no wish to spoil anybody's Christmas by reminding them of the litany of uncomfortable words with which the Bible is redolent, but, as I understand it, the spirit of Christmas calls for a large dollop of self-sacrifice---no proxies allowed.

Compassion was once a very useful word describing the best human behaviour. It has, unfortunately, become associated with the worst sort of welfarism: the sort that makes speeches, passes laws, ascribes blame, and votes other peoples' money, but knows no charity. For the sake of Christmases yet to come, it ought to be restored to its first meaning. Let us this Christmas, at least, raise a glass to our moral superiors, those thousands of people who do personally help others without thought of reward---because their compassion is 'com pati'.

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