

Things to Consider

- ▶ Recall a time when you were shown great compassion by someone. How did it feel? Do you remember your thoughts at the time? Did you feel you were being judged in any way, or just accepted for who you are?
- ▶ Think of a time when you were not shown compassion, but desperately wanted to receive it. How did that feel? What thoughts went through your mind then? Did you feel judged?
- ▶ How well do you do at showing compassion to yourself? If you don't, what might the blockage be for you?
- ▶ Can you truly feel compassion (in ways described in this brochure) for others? Think of some examples. Think too of examples where you struggle – why might this be? Is there a feeling of fear hidden away in your unconscious mind, and does it have a part to play? What is the cause? What might you do to overcome this?
- ▶ Imagine you die. Imagine too, in those first few seconds beyond your death, that God bursts forth into your consciousness with sheer delight and joy at your arrival and says almost breathlessly, *'Welcome (your name)! I am truly delighted to have you here! I have been looking forward to this moment with great anticipation and joy! I feel great pleasure in you.'*
 - ➔ Well, God is obviously coping with you, but could you cope with Him being so positive about you? What is happening here?
 - ➔ And if you can't believe this, why might this be?
 - ➔ Do you need to talk to someone about this?

Cultivating Compassion for yourself and others



We do not see a great deal of compassion in our world. In so many ways we are simply numbers and reduced to statistics. There can also be semi-anonymous abuse that individuals put on Twitter and Facebook, along with *Letters to the Editor* which at times, can border on the semi-abusive. Neither is there much sympathy for the underdogs in our Society.

And yet, despite us and our ways, God has a profound and inexhaustible compassion for every living thing – and that includes you!

So what then is compassion? *The Pocket Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as pity, but this is wrong, for it is simply to feel sorry for someone. That separates me from you, keeping you at a distance. Today, many would think of it in terms of showing mercy, sympathy and tenderness. There is truth in this but its real depths are much richer, for it goes to the core of our deepest feelings and is associated with the heart.

Let me explain this with two biblical examples.

The first: Hebrews 4.15 says of Jesus, 'For we have not a high priest who is unable to *sympathise* with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.' This verse is saying that Jesus has experienced life as we have with all its joys and sorrows.

That English word we translate as *sympathise* comes from a Greek word *sumpatheo* which is much stronger in the Greek than the English words *sympathy* and *compassion*. Charles Wolfe says of this Greek word, 'It is entering into the suffering of another and making it one's own rather than observing it from without. It is genuinely feeling another's pain, temptation or failure.'

This is what Jesus does. He enters deeply into our lives to the very centre of our being, and experiences our life from the inside. When we suffer He suffers with us. When we delight He delights with us. God is not like a general in an ancient war who sits on top of a hill and watches his troops go into battle and die. No, He leads from the front.

The second example: The Hebrew word for *compassion* is *rahamin* and it has two aspects to it – empathy and attachment – and it has links with maternity and the bowels. In essence then, compassion means in Hebrew, *trembling womb* and it speaks of that intimate relation between a mother and her new-born child.

This is intended to portray something of what the compassion of God for us looks like and what it means. It is an extraordinarily rich image.

So, how are we to respond? In answer to a question posed to Him, Jesus responded that we need to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. (Mark 12.28-34) He also spoke of the Golden Rule (Matthew 7.12), variations of which we find in many other religions and philosophies. Summed up it says, 'Do unto others what you would have them do to you' which by now after so many centuries is pretty obvious: If you don't like it done to you, don't do it to others! Feel compassion for them, for they are just like you in so many ways. They too struggle with life and carry burdens hidden from us.

And so it means that we are drawn to the frailty, the weakness and suffering of another, as God is to us. We are prepared to allow ourselves to be vulnerable for the sake of another human being, to participate in their experience, sensitively standing with them and beside them, in their hour of need.

Let me now focus on ourselves for often we remember God and others and forget self. I have sometimes heard people say they pray for others, but they do not pray for themselves. Yet they should; it is a false humility not to pray for oneself and our genuine needs.

One of the major reasons for our unwillingness to feel compassion for ourselves is perfectionism. We see our flaws and feel bad about ourselves. We don't believe we are lovable, let alone loved by God. God may love everyone else, yes, but not me! I am not lovable!

Yet God loves you to such a degree that you cannot begin to imagine, as I wrote in the brochure titled *The Great Lover*. Just accept the truth of that! Stop trying to beat yourself up! You don't have to earn or even deserve God's love for you. You can't. As with everyone, you won't measure up. He just loves you for yourself! The truth is if you cannot love yourself, you cannot truly love others.

We all struggle with this. That's okay. Just notice your feelings. No matter how hard it is for you, just try to accept God's love and look on yourself and others with deep compassion. We all struggle in this together, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing and in some way or other, we are all broken.