

Sacred Heart Novena *Gardiner Street (2)*

A compassionate heart.

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Introduction

Welcome again to these evenings devoted to the Sacred Heart. Each evening has a title, which last night was "a listening heart." Tonight's title is "a compassionate heart."

For us all, these last twelve weeks have constituted an invitation to compassion: compassion towards the ill and the bereaved, compassion towards members of our own family and household, and sometimes compassion towards ourselves. Compassion stands at the heart of religion too.

The Holy Book of the Muslims opens very invitingly: In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate: *Bismillaahir Rahmaanir Raheem*. The insistence on compassion is not at all unlike the first reading for last Sunday: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness." The roots of Islam are in Judaism, so no surprise that there should be a similarity. Going much further afield, compassion is a central teaching and practice of Buddhism, even if not quite identical as compassion in the Christian faith. And of course compassion was at the heart of Jesus' own ministry, very evident in the way he interacted with people.

Topic

Is there something distinctive about the Christian living and understanding of compassion?

Arguments

- 1.** My first instinct is to say, no / yes. No, because compassion is such a universal need and so evidently present in diverse traditions such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity. My first inclination is to affirm what we have in common. But if I'm asked "is there something distinctive about the Christian living and understanding of compassion?", then I want also to say "yes" there is something special about Christian compassion.
- 2.** We can see this already in the way the word "compassion" is found in the Gospels, as in for example, today's Gospel. In the Gospels, compassion is used only of Jesus or of God in the parables, such as the father of the prodigal son feeling compassion. Compassion means a deep, spontaneous feeling of sympathy and empathy. I was going to say a "gut" reaction and that would not be wrong. The Greek word for compassion means your innards. Even more interestingly, the Hebrew word goes back to the word for the womb – *rechem* – not at all unlike the "raheem" of the Koran. The word is maternal and feminine, indicating the bond between a woman and the child she carried. With this expression, we may say that Jesus was in touch with his feminine side. I'm not sure if we'd go as far as James Joyce does with Leopold Bloom and call him a womanly man.
- 3.** In both readings this evening, we heard stories of the dead being raised or resuscitated. When we look at the miracles in the New Testament, they may be divided broadly into two kinds, the healing miracles and the nature miracles. It has been helpfully observed that in the Gospels, the healing miracles are really about the

Kingdom of God, while the nature miracles are really about the Risen Jesus. In the case of Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain, we are in between a healing story and a nature miracle. The raising of the dead takes us beyond mere healing or therapy. Luke is really teaching us something else: Jesus is risen from the dead. God has "healed" us all of the "disease" of death by Jesus' own death and resurrection. This is the measure of God's compassion to us all: not simply compassion to lucky individuals in the Gospel stories but a deep outreach to every single human being. God loves us enough to have entered himself into the very human experience of suffering and death, showing us his compassionate solidarity with us all, and leading us through the resurrection to a whole new vision of life. No other religion is really saying this. Some early Christian writers felt this so strongly that they could write as follows:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even though we were dead in offences, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you are saved! – and he raised us up together with him and seated us together with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, to demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

No harm to be reminded of this is the time of a pandemic.

4. And so, the feast of the Sacred Heart – very devotional and traditional – reminds us of the very heart of the Christian proclamation: God's love, God's compassion, God's mercy. It is for us not only a gift but also a calling. At the start of the second letter to the Corinthians, there's a passage which invites and encourages:

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we may be able to comfort those experiencing any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2Corinthians 1:3-4)

We are what we are because we give it away! We can go on and ask ourselves practical question: how have I experienced compassion recently? Who has been compassionate to me? To whom have I been compassionate? Have I sensed there also the compassion of God for me?

Conclusion

Pope Francis has written a short reflection for the lead-up to the feast of the Sacred Heart. You watch it on YouTube as well. Here it is,

Many people suffer due to the great difficulties they endure. We can help them by accompanying them along an itinerary full of compassion which transforms people's lives. It brings them closer to the Heart of Christ, which welcomes all of us into the revolution of tenderness. We pray that all those who suffer may find their way in life, allowing themselves to be touched by the Heart of Jesus.