

Theological Background

1/2

'Compassion' and 'sympathy' have much in common and both are stronger in meaning than simply 'feeling sorry for' someone.

The words have their roots in the idea of 'suffering with' someone, putting yourself in someone else's shoes and experiencing what they experience. This leads to a desire to act, to do something. It is not patronizing. It is not about 'doing good' from a position of strength or 'remembering those less fortunate than ourselves'. Compassion requires an act of imagination and humility to share in the lives of others. Notice the qualities that Paul links together. He says 'clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.' (Colossians 3:12)

Jesus showed compassion towards the 'harassed and helpless' crowds (Matthew 9.36) and his works of healing were always prompted by compassion for people's suffering. He wept at the death of Lazarus and was moved to act.

The father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is not just forgiving. He is described as being filled with compassion. 'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.' (Luke 15:20) The father seems to understand everything that his son is feeling and responds by giving him everything he needs: a whole-hearted welcome, acceptance and love.

Christians have always had to wrestle with the problem of how a loving God could allow there to be evil and suffering in the world. There is no simple answer to this but we make the first step towards understanding when we grasp the idea that God the Father is not passively observing the suffering of the world from the outside. God fully identified with human suffering in the life and death of Jesus and continues to work to transform the sufferings of the world through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Theological Background

2/2

Biblical References

Psalm 145: 8-9

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

Isaiah 54:10

'Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,' says the Lord who has compassion on you.

Zechariah 7:9

This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'

2 Corinthians 1: 3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

1 Peter 3:8

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.