

COMPASSION

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As I finish a month on a busy Oncology ward I have been moved by the patients I have nursed in their attitudes towards their illness. I have seen the reactions of people being told they only have a couple of years to live, patients trying to cope with pain, fear, and the apparent hopelessness of the situation they are facing.

As a student I have found it particularly difficult to 'stand back' from the situation and not get too emotionally involved, while still retaining my empathy with the situation they are in. I found I never had the words to say or the capacity to make things better. God created us as creatures to be joyful - to live life in all its fullness. So to be nursing patients with no apparent hope for the future was getting particularly hard to be positive and not despair on their behalf. One patient in particular, Ruth*, taught me the value of compassion. She was angry and bitter about her illness and would eloquently tell me so - but would not usually allow me to do anything to help her. I said and did what I could but one day she told me to go away and draw the curtains around her so she did not feel like a 'freak show'. I did so, thinking that whatever I did would not make any difference to her anyway and there was little point. Ruth was crying out for the compassion that a few pillows and a trusty supply of morphine could not supply.

Jesus was fundamentally compassionate. When a leper came to Jesus, desperate to be healed, and said, 'if you are willing, make me clean' Jesus' heart was filled with compassion and he reached out and touched him saying, 'I am willing. Be clean!' (Mark 1:40-41) When he saw a widow whose only son had died, 'his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry".' (Luke 7:13)

I found it so easy to be compassionate towards those people who were easy to nurse - those who, in effect, appreciated my 'compassionate' efforts. Genuine and selfless compassion flows from the very centre of God to all; the kind Jesus demonstrated in the situations above, and when he was told that Herod wanted to kill him. He cried out, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you are not willing!' (Luke 13:34). That is true compassion.

As Christians we are told to 'clothe ourselves with compassion' (Col 3:12) and to 'be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36). Why? Because God is. If we truly want to honour God, then we must care about the things he cares about. His compassion flows out of his everlasting and steadfast refusal to give up on us and bring us back to Him. His mercies and loving kindness towards us are abundant despite our equally steadfast sinful nature and our insistence that we don't need him. Having a compassionate spirit comes once we have acknowledged our radical need as sinners for God's grace. It is only when we face our sin and desperate need for this grace that we are able to experience the depth of God's compassion towards us. If God, who is altogether perfect, is still loving and compassionate on sinners who

are unworthy of it, why are we, who are sinful and in constant need of forgiveness, not gracious and compassionate as well?

As I started to put this into practice I found myself deliberately looking out for Ruth, and being consistently kind towards her despite her hostility. It wasn't even particularly difficult – in a strange kind of way I found it rewarding doing it for God through caring for her – 'whoever is kind to the needy honours God' (Proverbs 14:31). God promises his blessing to those who respond with kindness to those who need it and act on their behalf. The book of Proverbs says that 'he who despises his neighbour sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy' (14:21), and that 'he who is kind lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done' (19:17).

When, a couple of weeks later, Ruth smiled at me and said, 'thank you – you're a good girl', I was almost speechless (I say almost because that is quite rare) – and I was completely elated that she felt comfortable enough to say something nice. It only spurred me on to serve her – and God – more, because it not only honoured God but also inspired both Ruth and me in the process. I was bouncing around the ward dishing out compassion for the rest of the shift like a school dinner lady.

As Christian student nurses and midwives it is utterly within our power to demonstrate Christ's compassion to all the patients we come into contact with. I hope and pray that we will never lose that vision, in keeping our eyes on God and letting his commendation, 'well done, good and faithful servant' (Matt 25:21) be what we live for.

Questions for Group Discussion / Personal Reflection

- **Who are the people that you are finding it challenging to care for at the moment?**
- **What help or encouragement has this article given you?**
- **What positive steps might you take from here on in? Try to be specific, one concrete action decided upon is probably going to be easier to maintain than a generally changed attitude.**
- **How can you get support from other Christians to help you in this task?**

Postscript:

Since starting to write this article Ruth has passed away. As I helped to lay out her body I was grateful that God had taught me how to show her something of his love in what were to prove to be her last days.

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*'Ruth' is an alias in accordance with our commitment to confidentiality