

And she had compassion on him . . .

Exodus i: 7-22; ii: 1-10
Luke xv: 1-7, 11-32;
Matthew xviii: 1-7, 10-15, 21-35
Arcana Coelestia 904; 6737

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And when she had opened the ark, she saw the child: and behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children. (Exodus ii: 6)

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. (Luke xv: 20)

Earlier this summer a sermon was preached in this tranquil place concerning what was described as an “active state in the church.” The thrust of that sermon was the appropriate care that ought to be exercised in acting in a charitable manner towards the neighbor. Of course, we must always hope that there is charity in our hearts when we interact with others, but we are to be on the lookout, as it were, for the state of the other we are engaging. Where we find that state of the neighbor or other person, in our own eyes and according to our discernment, to not be in order, we should best reserve our natural inclinations to treat the other kindly and, as it were, charitably. In other words, the greater charity in this situation is to deal with the other firmly, attempting to alert them to their disordered state and lead them to a more ordered state. There were two fundamental reasons offered for why firmness is the more appropriate form of charity in instances of this kind.

The first reason is that if one does not act out of firmness and an explanation of the disorder of which one disapproves and the proper order one seeks, one will confirm the other in their disorderly state, which runs the risk of compounding the disorder, and, as such, it is no real exercise of charity towards the neighbor. The second reason has been brought up in the parable of the prodigal son that we have just read. There were two sons in the parable: and the elder son, who had faithfully served his father all his days, upon hearing the music and seeing the dancing and learning of his prodigal brother's safe return, “*was angry, and would not go in.*” To others in such a shared community as the church, wit-nessing a disorderly state tolerated without comment, and even, in appearance, encouraged by the tender feelings and gentle remonstrance of those in authority, can only cause confusion, distrust, and perhaps envy. Even when stated in modern terms, this is not a healthy state for the psychology of the group. It is in this sense that we may endorse the principles and theme of that earlier sermon.

Indeed, what little is said about the reasons for the father's behavior towards his prodigal son in this parable seems to embrace the idea that great charity, let us call it “compassion,” ought to be shown towards those who “repent” of disorderly ways. The emphasis appears to be upon the reformation of conduct of which we disapprove. However, as I see it, what is said about the exercise of compassion as found in the explication of the two stories we have read is that it is more a two way street, and it is my sense that the issue itself involves another

“active state” in the church. Thus, I wish to explore the subject of compassion as it comes forth out of these two scriptural stories.

Although one is among the most famous of the Lord’s parables that He told while in the world, there is surprisingly little said about the parable of the prodigal son in the Third Testament. The only place where reference to the parable in its entirety is made is in the small unpublished work that Dr. I. Tafel named *Dicta Probantia* or “Proof Passages,” which has subsequently been published under the title *Scripture Confirmations*. The reference given is in section “XIII. Repentance,” and it says “*The joy of angels over one that repents (Luke xv: 7, 10) and of the lost son who repented (vers. 11 to end).*” It says the angels take joy in the repentance of others. If one works from this starting point, it is clear that the subject of the parable is that we are to receive those who repent with gladness of heart, almost as if, to once more speak in the terms of modern psychology, to reinforce the new state into which the prodigal person is coming. The emphasis—when we take into consideration the father’s explanation to the elder son who “*served thee, neither transgressed any time thy commandment*”—seems to be entirely upon the state of the recovered son, who “was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.” Yet, the apparently unequal treatment of the two brothers by their father raises many more questions in one’s mind than answers: unless, perhaps, we search out the reason for the father’s great joy, by looking more closely at the father, and at the joy of Pharaoh’s daughter in the weeping babe.

We may say that compassion is a function of personality, that similar to conscience, it is an attribute some seem to come by more readily than do others. Yet we must not mistake the compassion being spoken of as a natural kindness of heart, a universal sympathy of character. As with all genuinely spiritual loves, the compassion we are able to manifest comes from the Lord alone, and not unlike with conscience, it is a thing at which we must work in order for it to develop properly within us. We may gain an insight to what is going on with respect to compassion when we consider what is said about the compassion of Pharaoh’s daughter toward the child when it wept. In *Arcana Coelestia* 6737 that we read, it says that this compassion “*signifies admonition from the Divine, [which] is evident from the signification of ‘having compassion,’ as being an influx of charity from the Lord; for when any one from charity sees another in misery (as here Pharaoh’s daughter saw the child in the ark of rush, and weeping), compassion arises; and as this is from the Lord, it is an admonition. Moreover when they who are in perception feel compassion, they know that they are admonished by the Lord to give aid.*” They have compassion, and act on it, because they feel it as an admonition from the Lord.

How extraordinary an idea this is: when “*compassion arises*”—genuine compassion—it is perceived as a warning! And all of a sudden, our focus has been transferred from the one undergoing repentance to the one manifesting compassion. And what kind of a warning is this admonition? Virtually nothing is said in the Third Testament to clarify this powerful idea. But we can extrapolate something of the meaning of this idea. Throughout the Word the point is continually made that the Lord is Mercy itself, and the operation of His Mercy is the very nature of compassion: to hold us back from the debilitating effects of our own natures; to be constantly responding to our spiritual needs in all the states through which we go. So, on the one hand, in order for the compassion to be genuine, to operate in a genuine fashion,

we must acknowledge that it is the Lord's Mercy inflowing into our own minds and hearts according to our state, and that this is the Lord mediately responding to the states of others through our involvement with them. When we acknowledge this operation of the Lord, we ought to be able to discern the need of another, determine the nature of our involvement, and formulate an appropriate response. So, then, speaking in terms of the role of compassion, the focus is on the giver, the person reaching out to another. To bring this point home with vigor, recall what we read in *Arcana Coelestia* 904: "*The presence of the Lord is first possible with a person when he loves the neighbor. The Lord is in love, and so far as a person is in love, so far the Lord is present; and so far as the Lord is present, so far He speaks with a person. Man knows no otherwise than that he thinks from self, whereas he has not a single idea of thought ... from self, but he has ... what is good and true through angels from the Lord. Such is the influx with man, from which is his life and the intercourse of his soul with the body.*" In other words, when one is in a state of genuine compassion, one is a receptacle of the Lord's mercy, and a vehicle for the operation of the Lord's compassion. Seen in these terms, to truly be acting with compassion is a powerful personal responsibility. That one is in need of support is one direction on this street of sympathy: that one is fully capable of providing that support is the second, the responsible direction on the street.

I have written above that there is with me a sense of an "active state" within the church. Indeed, I've attempted to outline this state in sermons and addresses over the last few years. There is a theme to my concerns about the "active state" in the church, which is captured in our reading from Matthew, chapter xviii: "*Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.*" Yes, it is the same theme we find in the fifth chapter of *Matthew* (22-4), about leaving one's gift at the altar until we have gone out and reconciled with those having "aught against" us. That the "'offering a gift upon the altar' signifies all Divine worship," becomes a powerful point in the *Apocalypse Explained* 325:9 where it goes on to make clear that where there is a state lacking conciliation, it profoundly and detrimentally affects the whole state of that worship. Such an endeavor to seek reconciliation would be guided by compassion: a compassion that attempts to see another's plight from that other's shoes; a compassion that longs to see another be a part of one's community; and a willingness to work to bring such a state into being. When one views the church as a community, as a communion of individuals who have a commonality of interests, goals, and purpose, one might expect to find there a compassion that strives to understand individual circumstances and works to encourage a willingness to resolve misunderstandings and to heal wounds. Regardless of whether one individual sees another's repentance—for that is not the crucial issue—when there is genuine compassion at work, there develops an openness towards the possibilities of having common thought and action with one's associates. Compassion is far more a function of the will than of thought. It involves determination and commitment.

I began this service with the description in *Exodus* of the state of the Israelites at the time of "*a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.*" Of the Hebrews it says: "*And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them.*" The irony of this should be lost on none of us. We see ourselves as possessing and protecting a special doctrinal insight upon the Third Testament: however, in spite of the purpose we have set for ourselves, we have not increased

abundantly. The new Pharaoh, out of fear, viewed the Israelites' numbers as justifying the expedience of drowning their newly born male babies. How is this at odds with our situation in which our own children marvel at our spendthrift ways with our own membership, and eschew the chance to be brought within the official orbit of the church? While we may have our doctrinal purpose clearly in mind, while we work to bring the organized church into a new state of our sense of orderliness, while we strive to honor the letter of the law, both civil and, we hope, ecclesiastical, we seem to fail to see how a centripetal force has come into play. On the basis of any reasonable calculation, it would seem that we have no members to spare. Yet the phrases "people may vote with their feet" and "members are free to choose" make it sound as though some principle must outweigh and stand above the numerical factor. Roger Williams arrived at his great decision about tolerance when he discovered for himself that there is little or no power in one. Thus, it may be that it is in the numerical factor where the issue of compassion is most relevant.

Consider the dynamic of the numbers expressed in the parable of the lost sheep in *Matthew xviii* (11-14): to wit, "*How think ye? If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seek that which is gone astray?*" The expression "to go astray" may represent a state of being in need of reformation and repentance—certainly that is the case with the prodigal son—but when viewed in the context of a sheep, that ought not to be assumed. Even so, the parable continues: "*And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.*" This echoes how the father treats the prodigal son in comparison to his elder brother who never went astray. Now, on a fundamental basis, there may often be a desire to legislate what will be acceptable conduct within the church, and tests made to enforce it. But viewed in the context of a flock of sheep—so often a pastor's description of his congregation—the Lord's stand point is that every single individual is as precious as any other. How can we, exercising compassion, view our church membership any differently?

When it comes to the idea of setting up tolerances for church membership, there is found a startling reference to compassion in *Arcana Coelestia* 1803 where it elucidates the phrase "go forth out of the bowels." For it says: "*That this signifies those who are in love to the Lord and in love toward the neighbor is evident from the signification of 'bowels,' and of 'going forth out of the bowels,' which is to be born; and here it means those who are being born of the Lord. They who are being born of the Lord, that is, who are being regenerated, receive the Lord's life. The Lord's life, as before said, is the Divine love, that is, love toward the whole human race; or His will to eternally save ... all men. . . . [4] It is evident from this that the Lord's love itself, or mercy itself, and compassion toward the human race, are what are signified in the internal sense by 'bowels,' and by 'going forth out of the bowels'; consequently by 'them that go forth out of the bowels' are signified those who have love.*" People of past times knew some things of these ideas, and, as it relates to compassion, Oliver Cromwell expressed it famously in his admonition, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken?" That sentiment ought to be at the heart of our compassion: that rather than we act out of any sense of certainty and righteousness, we instead come to consider all the possibilities, viewed from all the angles, in order that we come to share in the feelings and point of view of others.

Compassion as a word envisions this element of sharing in a state: it comes from the idea of being in sympathy or suffering with another. If we are to be a community, we must wish to be in this sharing, we must commit ourselves to the idea of coming into such a state of empathy and of sympathy. No one can question that the church has been through a serious trial, testing its self-confidence, its sense of purpose, its resolve. No one will argue that discipline, imagination, initiative, and inspiration will be needed to restore the group confidence and sense of purpose. But let us not lose sight of the idea that this is not just the responsibility of a few: it is a group effort; it needs to be fostering a collective dynamic. When one considers what is said about compassion, that when it inflows from the Lord it is perceived as an admonition; when one takes into account the basic element of sharing, both of what is positive and what is negative; when one is dedicated to the purpose of bring about healing: then the church as an organic organization can come into a state from which it can move forward with both confidence and *esprit de corps*.

To my mind there is an “active state” at play within the church. It may be viewed as being responsive to what has happened within the recent past; it may be motivated by a wish to install safeguards to protect our future; in every sense it may be well meaning and energized with good intentions: it may also be a danger. If we accept that the church is a community of diverse individuals having common aspirations; if we will dedicate ourselves to a willingness to engage each other with compassion; if we will look to the Lord for guidance and be accepting that His Providence is working independently of our desires: then we may find that the compassion we embrace is His compassion, and we may find it to be the admonition that leads us all into a state of harmony and organizational health.

“And the woman took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew . . .” (Exodus ii: 9-10)

Amen