

Last week, I started a four-part mini-series which I have called “Old wine in new wineskins”. I looked at the topic of an angry God. You can read my talk on our website and it also has the link to the video I showed. As I have said in the blurb, the most often given reason for people either not to believe in God or to ignore the Old Testament is that God appears to be constantly angry and violent and not at all like the Jesus we meet in the New Testament. I want to give you some help in understanding that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. This week’s topic is a compassionate God?

When I started to write this sermon, I got to thinking about three English words - sympathy, empathy and compassion. While these words are close cousins, they are not synonymous with one another. Sympathy means you can understand what the person is feeling. Empathy means that you feel what a person is feeling. As we all know, it is easier to sympathise than to empathise. Compassion takes empathy and sympathy a step further.

When you are compassionate, you feel the pain of another (i.e., empathy) or you recognise that the person is in pain (i.e., sympathy), and then you do your best to alleviate the person’s suffering from that situation. At its Latin roots, compassion means “to suffer with.” Thus we take action.

The Bible doesn’t explain compassion like a dictionary does, simply telling us what the word means. Instead, the Bible defines compassion by showing us what compassion looks like and what is involved with being compassionate. Of all the references in the Bible to compassion, 80 percent refer to God's compassion to us, and only 20 percent refer to human compassion. Put another way, this word used to describe this feeling of deep emotion is most commonly used to describe God. Let’s watch a video about the word...

In the Old Testament, Israel is depicted as constantly turning their backs on God, but God continually has compassion for them when they cry out to him. The moral quality of the people doesn’t seem to matter—God

always listens when people cry out to him. This is an amazing characteristic of God to depend on, that we can know what his disposition is when we cry out to him.

Let's take a look at our first reading... The Israelites are in exile and are complaining that God has forsaken and forgotten them. *"But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.'* But God tells them that they have misunderstood the discipline of a parent: *"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me."* God tells them it is more likely for a mother to forget that she has a son than it is that God would forget any one of his people. This reminds us of the root of the Hebrew word for compassion... rakhamim meaning womb. God tells them that no matter how they feel at any moment, he has not forsaken or forgotten them. They are his people forever. They are engraved on his hands – every time he uses his hands or looks at them, he is reminded of them, and he sees the walls of Jerusalem constantly before him. He cannot possibly forget them. A very strong picture.

Then in other places in the Hebrew Scriptures, God is pictured as a compassionate father of a vulnerable child. None of the twelve tribes have been truly loyal but Ephraim has been exceptionally difficult.

Yet God says: *"Is Ephraim my dear son? The child in whom I delight? Though I speak against him, I still remember him; Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,"* (Jer) We also declared the most repeated verses in the OT about God's character in the psalm: The Lord is gracious and compassionate...

The Psalm then talks about God's mercy and that he does not treat us as we deserve and that section ends by saying *Just as a father has*

*compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he himself knows our frame; he is mindful that we are but dust.*

These verses show the character of God, as well as the vulnerable nature of humanity. If we read through the prophets, God's anger is always tempered with his mercy, his compassion, and his desire for his people to turn back to him. He is prepared to forgive at any time and listens to those who cry out to him with compassion, even if they have not previously trusted him while letting them experience the consequences of their actions - more of which you will hear about next week when Adrian speaks about violence in the Bible.

One more thing to consider - throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is continually showing compassion to the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor while asking us to do the same. So many laws enforce this attitude. *"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers, and towards the poor and needy in your land"* and *"God in his Holy dwelling, the Father to the fatherless and defender of the widow"* . We constantly read in the prophets that the chosen people of God are forgetting to do this, hence they will be punished.

And then God enters into our world through Jesus and sees first hand the suffering and the hypocrisy that is every day life. Again one of the new testament words used for compassion can be tied into the idea of the womb. One of the first people Jesus has compassion on is a widow and, as we heard in our second reading, her son is the first person he brings back from the dead. He is giving life not only to the young man but also to the widow who would have been in dire straights without someone to care and watch over her. Widows were not treated well at that time. Jesus would have known that and was following the law of Moses as he miraculously gave her back her life.

So I would like to suggest that compassion is rooted in the very character of God and we see it throughout the Old Testament - in the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. Jesus then shows us that same compassion which results in his death and resurrection. The New Testament does not represent a departure from the Old Testament, but, as Jesus says himself, the fulfilment of it. *'Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I came not to abolish but to fulfil.*