

WHAT A PITY!

Words – like people – have their ups and downs –

“Pity” – for example – was once a noble word – but now? It has taken a terrible hit and hit rock bottom.

“Who wants pity today?”

For instance, are you pleased when someone says, “How I pity you?” Not likely! It has a condescending ring – as though the speaker considered you somehow weaker than himself. You might even snarl back at him, “Don’t pity me, you ... I don’t want your pity.”

Or, if someone came into your house, took one look at you and said, “Why, you’re the most pitiful looking thing I ever saw” would you feel complimented or encouraged? I doubt it. You’d probably take to your bed –or take a stick to the person who said it.

First of all “Pity” in scripture means: A feeling of tender compassion. A) As such it is in the first place characteristic of God Himself – “the Lord” says the New Testament, “is very pitiful.” (James 5:11) This does not mean that God is very ineffectual or weak or that he is very condescending to us. It means that we believe in a God who has feelings – that we do not live in an uncaring universe, living out our Lilliputian existences in some mega-galaxy with no god to care whether we strangle now or struggle on for a few more years and die like ___?___ under a dock. No, we believe in a God who feels a tender compassion for us and all his creatures (a leap of faith if ever there was one!)

The stoics, however, in the time of Jesus did not believe in a god like this – to them god was utterly incapable of feeling—insensible to joy or pain – unmoved by the laughter or tears of his creation – apatheia was their word for Him. God was apathetic – out of contact with the universe – not affected by man’s affairs – hearing no mortal’s prayer, feeling no pity.

We still have this philosophy with us – our contemporary theatre and literature are filled with characters nauseated by their nothingness under hollow heavens – lost in the hell of ultimate loneliness – with no god to give either a blessing or a damn – or no god – no god at all –or – at very best – a god apatheia – apathetic about – not affected by – man’s affairs –hearing no mortal’s prayer – feeling no pity. So – “gimme another snort and what the heaven or hell difference does it make, ah?”

Now into such a world view as this came – and into such a world view as this still comes to this day ... Yeshua, Jesus of Nazareth ... showing such a feeling of tender kindness for all men – that some men said, My God!” (i.e., “God must be like this,” and some still say it. They are called “Christians”.

It may be commonplace to say, “God is love” – but if you lose for yourself this vision – that within the universe – there is a God – who has for you – and for all creation – a feeling of tender mercy –

if you lose this vision – I say – you are pretty much lost. But if in the living presence of Christ the Lord you discover – for yourself – for your own self – that in your sorrow as in your joy “The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” – then you are found and lost no more.

But if – in the Bible – pity as a feeling of tender compassion—is first a Characteristic of God – it is also a characteristic of God’s people. “Be ye ...pitiful,” says the New Testament and it doesn’t mean to be a sentimental slob –a tatterdemalion, ineffectual, inferior –

It means – have a feeling of tender concern in your own hearts for others – the way God feels for you. For God’s sake, have a feeling for others! As W.H. Audin said, “The seas of pity live locked and frozen in each age.”

The stoics in the time of Jesus did not believe in feeling like this. Just as they thought God was unfeeling – they thought we ought to be unfeeling too. We ought to be like this God and not care. So, they said if you loose your cloak or your dog –your arm or your child – your life or your wife –you ought – said the stoic – to be above feeling –you ought to say – in the face of your own or anyone else’s joy or pain –“It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter at all. I don’t care. I don’t care a bit.” That’s why they put on their tombstones these four desolate words: “I – do – not – care.”

Yet we still have this philosophy with us – one still finds characters who keep trying to tell themselves in the face of fleeting pleasure or permanent pain, “It doesn’t really matter. I don’t care.” These people try to hold themselves aloof from the feelings of others. They don’t want to – are afraid of – getting involved.

For example, here is the parent who never really gives affection – never rejoices in a child’s little triumphs – never senses a child’s fright – never helps him overcome shame – never comes close to the heart – but keeps his distance and pays the bills and thinks this is all there is to being a father.

Here is the physician or the parson whose eyes give back no warm understanding to a tale or woe – whose lips are thin, whose smile is mechanical, superior – who has no real concern for the pain or tragedy of his patient or parishioner.

Here is the professional or business man or woman whose hand is quick to catch the buck – but slow to catch another hand – in creature understanding, in Christian sympathy, in eagerness to share a load.

Here is any modern stoic who thinks the only way to peace of life is to banish all feeling, all emotion – and live in chilly isolation from the world. These are actually followers of Nietzsche who thought pity was weakness.

But – for the Christian – who believes in a god who feels for him – this life without pity is impossible.

For our Lord was “moved with compassion” by all sorts and conditions of folk – he did not condemn prostitutes and publicans as hopeless but felt them to be wanderers who needed someone to lead them home – his heart went out to those with empty bellies, blind eyes, leprous hands – he never once thought of them as dangerous or a nuisance. They did not fill him with loathing, with disgust, these hungry, dirty, disease ridden hoards – only with longing to heal them. He doesn’t stand aloof from a weeping widow who has lost her only son – he’s there, warm, compassionate with tender concern.

So no man or woman may call himself a Christian – a little Christian – today – and not have a feeling of tender concern for the needs of all people. Can a person be a Christian though he recites and claims to believe all the creeds in Christendom? And yet feel loathing for a person not of his kind? Not of his class? Or feel disgust for someone not in his state of health? Or contempt for someone not of his so-called moral stature? No —for the New Testament command is: “be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” (Eph. 4:32)

What a difference keeping this command makes – I can think of more than one home that has been transformed by making an humble and honest effort just “to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s have forgiven you?”

Or what a difference this feeling of tender concern makes in the life and work of any man or woman. It shows in the face – in the tone of voice – in all ways – in the desire to understand the other’s situation – to appreciate his point of view – to know his need and in an eagerness to help him meet it.

Which brings us at once to the second meaning of “pity” in the Bible. It is more than simply a “feeling of tender compassion” on the part of God and man.

It is also most importantly – concern in action. It is lively kindness. It is doing something to meet the need.

Like “love,” “pity” is not a word—or even a feeling—so much as it is a deed. A pity that is only a “tut-tut-tutting” and an “o dear me-ing” is not worth the breath it’s carried on. What is the good of simpering, “I feel so-o-o sorry for poor Mrs. Coughstone -- I do wish there were something I could do” – and then never giving it a second thought – never attempting to do anything – or turning a deaf ear when someone does suggest something practical that could be done. Some of us use up every erg of benevolent energy we possess in a gush of pity – and haven’t a bit left over to do anything about it.

We feel sorry for Mr. You-Know-Who – but we wouldn’t lend him a dime or pick him up out of a shower of rain! We deplore the condition of groups in our society -who are treated like trash – but we wouldn’t lift a voice to their defense or a finger to help them. We say, “Isn’t it awful the way these people have to live” and that’s the end to it.

Maybe we are quite sincere in “feeling ‘sorrow’ for” – and, indeed, this is where pity begins – in a feeling of sorrow or a wrench at the heart – a sensitive spirit – but this is not where pity ends – not Christian pity – for if it doesn’t lead to kindness in action – a lively kindness – to doing something to meet the need – then it isn’t Christian pity at all – it’s just mawkish sentiment – the proverbial tears of the crocodile – or as Thomas Hobbes said “fear that oneself might end up like that on Human Nature – an emotional glut that’s altogether selfish.”

The New Testament makes it clear that God’s compassion for us was not confined to a sort of heavenly “tut-tutting” – to a sort of celestial “o dear me-ing” – far from it. “God, says the New Testament, so loved the world” God’s feeling for his creation was so deep – “he sent his only begotten son” – he did something about it – he entered the time stream himself – broke into human history – “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life” – that men and women might become what God originally intended they should be. Here is compassion in action. “What a pity!”

And how true this was of the life of Jesus Christ. He didn’t burble pity and go his way. “I feel so sorry for you – I’ll send you a Hallmark card, bye, bye now. God will look after you. I’m too busy.” He saw, he stopped, he stooped to help. He caused the blind to see, the lame to walk. He faced death and the cross where he gave his life a ransom for many. His own pity was active, sacrificial. “What a pity” it was.

And in all his parables that speak of compassion – it is always more than feeling – it is always feeling in action. So, a master has pity on a servant who cannot pay his debt (Matt 18:33) and is expected to show mercy himself – a father forgives and restores a prodigal son (Luke 15:20) – a Samaritan sees and stops and stoops to help an injured man on the Jericho Road. Always – it is to see the need – then quietly, gently do the deed.

Pity is – a Christian virtue – yes – one of the noblest, one of the most robust – like God himself. But pity is, more than a feeling – it is tender concern in action.

Something we all need from God and others – and something we all need to practice – for God and others.

The stoics were wrong – there is no peace in isolation. In the words of our opening hymn – “Where pity dwells – the peace of God is there.”

Amen