

***How could I part with you? Israel, how could I give you up?
My heart within me is overwhelmed, fever grips my inmost being.***

The compassionate God

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I. The true name of God: "I am with You always

The Exodus story is a key text of the Old Testament which reveals the true nature of God. The account is central to the Bible and provides the first self-identification of God. Yahweh revealed himself as the one who he will be in the history of humankind: the one who hears the cries of those living in oppression and who is determined to do something about it.

I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt have heard their cry to be free of their slave-drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their suffering. I mean to deliver them out of the hand of their oppressors. (Ex. 3:7-9)

The God of the Bible is a God who - while looking at his creation - sees, hears and is emotionally upset by the misery, the suffering, the pain, the oppression and the injustices done to each other. It "pains" him, he "suffers" under what he sees, hears and feels. It is the situation in which he finds his creation that affects him, a situation best described as "lack of life" or as "diminished" life. God cannot stand this state of affair, he, the "Lover of Life" (Wis11:24-26), spontaneously wants to take this lack away and to bring the fullness of life. In order to accomplish his promise God chose Moses, one of the oppressed, to be his agent of life:

I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt. (3:10)

When Moses objects to this selection, the only reassurance he gets is ***_I will be with you_***, or more accurate: *I will be at the time - in the place - under circumstances - as I will be*. This phrase, *_I will be with you_*, becomes the leitmotif throughout God's redeeming actions in history: to national leaders such as Joshua (Josh 1:9) and the Judges (Gideon, Judg. 6:16) to kings (Solomon and David, 1 King 1:37), to prophets (Jeremiah, Jer 1:8) to Jesus (Acts 10:38), and finally to the Church (Mt 28:20). Whatever the proper translation of the enigmatic statement commonly rendered '*I am who am*', Yahweh is the God who delivers from oppression in order to give life: *"This is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations (Ex 3:15).*

The true name and therefore the true essence of the biblical God is described as *_always being faithfully with us_*, later to be expressed as 'Immanuel'. That phrase will always adequately identify Yahweh as the Lord of Israel. 'Name' in the Bible is the person under one specific aspect: the person, insofar as one is present and active and communicates oneself. In our text God reveals himself under a name not known beforehand and, under this new name, he wants to be known and to be approached.

Say this to the sons of Israel, I am Yahweh, (and THEREFORE) I will free you from the Egyptian burdens.....I will release you... I will deliver you..(Ex. 6:6).

This is forever the meaning of the 'name' Lord. In all prayers, in the liturgy and in the hearts of the people of Israel, God is the God who answered the cry of the poor and delivered them from the bondage of Egypt. God's entry into his creation aims ultimately at bringing into the lack of life the fullness of life.

The Bible is about a God who has only one intention with his creation: to lead it into the fullness of his own life.

Years ago I attended a lecture by a self-proclaimed French atheist at the Catholic University in Washington. Its title was *An Atheist Reads the Bible.* He spoke for an hour and held his audience absolutely spellbound. The most dramatic part was in his concluding words when he raised the Bible up high and emphatically pronounced: *Ladies and Gentlemen, the basic message of this book, you call the Bible, can be summarized in one single sentence: 'Life will triumph over death.'* It is not death that will have the last word but life in all its fullness. Each page of this book in thousands of ways tells you that death is not the outcome of all that exists but life. But since this is not the obvious but certainly the most unlikely, I am an atheist. And this because I cannot believe in this message in the face of what I experience every day: Not life but death will have the last word.

Jesus understood his mission precisely under this aspect as well. *I came that they may have life and have it to the full (Jn10:10).* His message, therefore, aims at life: it wants to restore life, to liberate suppressed and diminished life and to offer the fullness of life in all its dimensions, that means physical, psychological, and spiritual. The message aims at the restoration of life and the full unfolding of the human person.

II. The true content of God's name: *Rahamin*

In the Hebrew language the words which express best God's sentiment and feeling towards his creature are *"Chesed"* and *_rahamin_*. Chesed means fidelity, being secured trustworthy and expresses a more masculine attitude. Rahamin on the other hand stresses a more feminine attitudes and is generally translated as *compassion*. The word is taken from the word *_womb of a woman._* Thus the word *_compassionate_* bears the connotation of *_wombishness,_* loving the way a mother loves the child of her womb, nourishing, giving life. It is - as we said - a very feminine and motherly term and denotes the ability to suffer with, to enter deeply into a situation, to be filled with empathy, as if one is experiencing the situation personally and not as an observer. The word really means to be able to share the suffering and pain of others and also to experience their joy and happiness as if it was all happening to me. The word, as applied to God, is comprehensible only to those who know, with all the fibres of their being, in total self-surrender and with passion, the meaning of unconditional love.

In the Old Testament we can already observe a shift in God's behaviour towards his wayward people: from a God who gives way to his anger and wrath to a God whose heart is moved by deep love and compassion, who cannot punish and destroy but let compassion triumph over all other feelings.

There are two texts in the Old Testament which disclose the struggle in the heart of God. In the flood narrative, the beginning in Gen 6:5-7 has God resolve to take vengeance on "his" wayward creation. But note that God makes the resolve not in anger, but in *grief and sorrow*. The flood narrative spins out the troubled tale. But by 8:12 something decisive has happened. Nothing is changed in the imagination of humankind, which is still evil. What has happened is a change wrought in the heart of God, who will no longer take vengeance. The move in God's heart from 6:5-7 to 8:21 suggests that, instead of humankind suffering, God takes the suffering as "his" own. God resolves to turn the grief in on "himself" rather than to rage against "his" creation. God bears the *vengeance* of God in order that "his" creation can have compassion.

The same "turn" is more visible in Hos 11:1-9. Verses 1-7 are a conventional statement of God's anger and punishment. But in vv. 8-9, God has internalized the rage, turned the anger so that "his" own "heart quakes." God resolves not to take vengeance on Israel, but to contain it within "his" own person. In this profound moment, God breaks with his habits of heaven and earth. God presents "himself" in a radical graciousness. "He is God and not man." This God is also a God unlike any other gods (Ps 82). Such graciousness is not

easy, in heaven or on earth. It is not simply or obviously gained. It is gained only by God's acceptance and internalization of the vengeance which gets outwardly expressed, now, only as compassion. Unmitigated compassion is possible only because God hears the pain of vengeance in "his" own person (W. Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms*, pp. 76-77).

In an amazing way of putting it the Pope resonates in his first encyclical Hosea's text by stating that God's love is even greater than his justice:

God's passionate love for his people—for humanity—is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice (Deus Caritas est 10).

Perhaps the most moving expression of God's feeling of deep love and compassion towards his people is expressed in the well-known text of the prophet Isaiah:

Can a woman forget her baby and not love the child she bore? Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you. I have written your name on the palms of my hands (Is 49:14-16).

Such compassion does not remain merely passive, on the level of feelings; it calls for a physical response in the sense that compassion for another is felt in the center of one's body. It is a love which calls for concrete action. It is a feeling often expected of Yahweh who has mother-love (Is 49:15; Jer 31:20) or father-love (Ps 103:13; Is 63:15-16) for Israel. It is this womb-love of Yahweh which leads to forgiveness for his wayward children.

God lays down on the earth

I attended once a seminar on Christian-Muslim dialogue. Invited were Christians as well as Muslims. One among the Muslims, was a Mullah, a learned man. To get to know each other better the facilitator had prepared posters to which the participants were encouraged to comment and to share what thoughts these posters would evoke in them. On the first poster which was put in the middle of the circle on the floor was written with big letters "Religion." An amazing varieties of comments and thoughts were brought forth on the meaning of this word religion. Then a second poster was placed in the middle of the floor with the Word "God". Then something unexpected happened. The Mullah reacted agitated and became visibly more and more restless on his chair. Finally he stood up looked for an empty chair put it in the middle of the circle. Then he bent down very slowly, took the poster into his hands with great reverence and respect. He held it up and put it gently on the chair saying: "Ladies and gentlemen, please, one does not place *God* on the floor".

Touched and taken back by so much reverence and awe shown even to the piece of paper on which the word *God* was written, we all looked at the man with embarrassment and astonishment. I was really struck by the Mullah's gesture but I thought. " Here it is_ The provocation of our Christian faith is precisely the statement that God literally came down from heaven in order to "lay on the earth". As we read in St. Luke: "And they placed him into a manger"

The incarnation of God in the person Jesus of Nazareth is the most difficult teaching of Christianity for the non-Christian religions. For Jews and Muslims it is offensive to state Jesus is the incarnation of this God, the God with us, our Emmanuel. We cannot understand Jesus unless we see him as the compassion of God. Compassion of God in Jesus is not a bending towards the underprivileged from a privileged position; it is not reaching out from on high to those who failed to make it in the upward drive.

On the contrary, it is a moving directly to those people and places where suffering is visible and most tangible so as to build a home there without ever leaving again. What is so unexpected and disturbing in God's compassionate love in Jesus is that it is characterized by a downward pull.

Through his whole life and mission Jesus reveals the limitlessness of God's compassionate love for his creatures in accepting absolute powerlessness. The true mystery of our God is not that he takes away our pain and our suffering but that he first wants to share it with us. Only when he has tasted it, experienced it, can it be changed; only then can new life come forth. The God of Jesus is not an all-powerful God but a compassionate God. The real news in Jesus' message is that God is not a distant God, unmoved by our misery and pain, but a God who is 'with us', who is moved by our pain and misery, who participates in the fullness of our sin-permeated human condition, a God who is 'our disfigure'.

Compassion does not deny what is wrong

The nature and behavior of God towards his creature does not guarantee that we will never have to suffer or that we are _insured_ against every eventuality, or that we will never die. It simply tells us that God will always be there; that we can count on his presence at all times. The problem is that our image of God is too far removed from the image that Jesus gave us.

God's love for us is a suffering-love. But the stress has to be on love. Like a mother who loves her child and what is not loveable, even wrong, distorted and sinful she suffers but she will never stop loving her child no matter how disfigured the "only child" of God may be.

Compassion, however, does not mean I don't see the wrongs people do and I don't have the obligation at times to point it out to them and ask for amendment. Damage and hurt inflicted on others rightly asked for restoration and retribution for what was taken. But the offender always remains before God the "only child" whom God cannot stop loving with infinite love. How God behaves towards the sinner might be seen in the following story which I once watched on Television:

There was to be an execution of a young man who had raped a young girl and then brutally murdered her. She had been the only child of a couple. The day before the execution a television station aired an interview with the father of the murdered girl followed by an interview with the mother of the young man who had done it.

The reporter asked the father of the girl: "Sir, how do you feel knowing that tomorrow the murderer of your only child will be executed? The father's answer was something like this: "I have been waiting for that day with anticipation. You can be sure I will be there. I want to see how they take the life out of this monster." On and on he went. All the grief and pain just poured out of him with a deep bitterness bordering almost on revenge and hatred against the man who had done this to his only child. The last sentence was the one that struck me most. He said: "If this misfit, this monster will not burn in hell forever you can be sure that I will never believe in a God again."

I had not walked in the man's shoes and not experience all the grief and pain that he and his wife had to go through but I was stunned by what he said.

Then followed the interview with the mother of the boy who had done this crime. Surprisingly composed she said to the interviewer: "What my son has done is abominable, there is no excuse for that. He deserved his punishment. I have never asked anyone for an amnesty for him. He has to face what he did. My son, however, regretted his deed bitterly and he has found to God, his creator. And God has forgiven him. He has tried a hundred times to reach out to the parents of the girl he murdered but, of course, they refused to listen to his apology and his deep sorrow for what he did. I will not hold that against them, I understand. Tomorrow my son will die, not easy for a mother to go through without being deeply affected by the death of her son.

But I know God has forgiven him and will take him into his arms like the prodigal in the Gospel story. And I hope you people will not hold it against me that I love my child. He was always a good son to me.”

Reflecting on this story, I think God is like this mother. There is no excuse for a crime like this. But - as said a few times - the murderer remains still an only child for God, whom he loves with eternal affection.

There are three interrelated kinds of compassion which we find particularly expressed in Jesus’ own ministry:

First, there is *fellow feeling* which refers to the ability to identify with the suffering of the other person because one has suffered something similar.

Secondly, there is “*wounded wonder*”. This goes beyond appearances to recognize and approve of the inner worth and value of another person in a wonder-full manner. No matter how wounded the other person may be this “wounded wonder” goes beyond and recognizes in an intuitive way any person’s inalienable value. The person’s *woundedness* is not the focus of attention. Once we see a person with the eyes of God, that he is an “only child” a sense of reverential wonder should arise in us.

I met a confrere of mine who had open a house in India where he welcomed any stranded person particularly young people from the first world who had come to Asia for “enlightenment” and who had been either deceived or were hopelessly caught up in drugs. By describing to me the kind of people he had to encounter he said: “At times I did not know how to relate to many of these human racks, some filled me with disgust, repulsion and even with fear but when I was able to see each one of them as a person God loved dearly and cared for compassionately, I was amazed to see how my prejudices melted and finally collapsed. I become more and more able to welcome them as my brothers and sisters no matter of what they had made out of their life and whatever their belief and religion may be. I just was able to look at them as “wounded wonders.”

Thirdly, there is *indignant* compassion. If I am conscious of a person’s innermost value, I will resist anything that goes against this person’s health and happiness. I want to offer instant relief in whatever way possible. Jesus showed this kind of compassion when he encountered people suffering and in moments of imposed distress. His first reaction is often described in this way: *and he was angry*. Jesus felt that the predicament of the person was against his/her dignity and that should not be. Because God is a “lover of life” he cannot tolerate any kind of evil that aims at diminishing the life a “child of God.”

Albert Nolan expresses this compassion of God conveyed in Jesus in a rather striking way when he writes:

If we wish to treat Jesus as our God, we would have to conclude that our God does not want to be served by us, but wants to serve us; God does not want to be given the highest possible rank and status in our society, but wants to take the lowest place and to be without any rank and status; God does not want to be feared and obeyed, but wants to be recognised in the suffering of the poor and the weak; God is not supremely indifferent and detached, but is irrevocable committed to the liberation of humankind, for God has chosen to be identified with all people in a spirit of solidarity and compassion. If this is not a true picture of God, then Jesus is not divine. If this is a true picture of God, God is more truly human, more thoroughly humane than any human being. God is a supremely human God.” (Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*)

In short we can say: *compassion* is the key to understand correctly Jesus’ whole ministry and life. Jesus chose compassion as his *lifestyle*. Only so can we explain his compassionate solidarity with the poor and marginalised people of his time. His whole *preaching* is motivated by compassion. The core of his

message was the unconditional and unrestricted compassion of God. All his *actions* are motivated by compassion and so his *death* was being seen as a supreme act of compassion with suffering humanity. Lastly we could say, even Jesus *intercessory prayers* during his ministry were ultimately motivated by compassion.

Many people imagine God as all powerful, far removed from all earthly concerns. He is just 'up there'. If we are in deep trouble and all seems to crumble under our feet, when suffering and hurt seem to question even God's very existence, then we cry out to him like this: _You are all powerful, you claim to love me and care about me, if this is so, where are you? Please, come and rescue me, help me_ Open a window and stretch out your mighty arm and pull me out of all the misery and hurt I experience right now. Do something about it_" These are the cries we hear in so many psalms.

God's answer in such a situation will be something like this: _I cannot reach you from on high, my mighty arm is too short. But trust me. I really do love you and, therefore, I will surely do something that fits your situation. I will come down into your life, into your misery and anguish. Just pull up a chair for me and I will be there to share your anguish, taste your misery and weep with you. I will console you, help you, comfort you, heal you, show you a way out. I will be your guide. I will be with you as your friend. But you will have to understand something very important: I cannot live your life and make everything pleasant for you, free of pain and suffering. That I cannot do. You must live your life and to live means to encounter anguish, pain, suffering, many worries and real problems and ultimately death. This you share with every creature on earth. The difference is: I will always be there with you and in particular when you feel lonely, dejected and hurt."

One of the most moving text concerning God's infinite compassion that has found a constant echo in the psalms and prophetic texts is God's revelation to Moses on mount Tabor in Exodus 34:5-6.

And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with Moses as he called upon the name of the Lord. Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, _The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth; who keeps loving-kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin"

Ps 103:7-13

*He made known His ways to Moses,
His acts to the sons of Israel.
The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness.
He will not always strive with us;
Nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His loving-kindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.*

You should be as compassionate as our Father in heaven is compassionate (Lk 6:36)

Jesus demanded from his disciple that they should love one another as he has loved them. If his life principle was compassionate love, obviously, our love for each other receives its measure from here. It is therefore compassion that must shape and order our life as disciples of Jesus. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit and not just a natural way we used to act but it is surely a sign that the risen Christ has taken hold of us.

Most probably, there is only one way through which God's glory can be praised: to be as compassionate as the Father in heaven. Most probably compassion with all creatures is the only holiness which we can ever reach – and that is probably enough. We are not called however, that through us God's perfection should be revealed - but that God's glory, which means his compassion, be actively demonstrated. God's glory is his wounded love.

Compassion means to accept people as they are: with all their weaknesses, faults, their compulsions, inherited prejudices, vices, bad habits and acquired attitudes and bear them. One does not approve of what is wrong or false but one does not condemn. St. Paul in his letter never gets tired of telling his readers that it is in "bearing each others burdens" that they prove to be disciples of Christ.

Does your life in Christ make you strong? Does his love comfort you? Do you have fellowship with the Holy Spirit? Do you have kindness and compassion for one another? I urge you then, to make me completely happy by having the same thoughts, sharing the same love, and being one in soul and mind. Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourselves. And look out for one another's interest, not just for your own. The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had:

He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death, his death on the cross. (Phil 2:1-3).

It is only in compassionate love that we participate in the mission of Christ to redeem the world the way Jesus did. Only suffering love is redemptive. We redeem each other by bearing each other's burden in love. This is particularly important to realize where we live in community. There is no ideal community since we are all wounded and lack life. But in our union with Christ we can participate in the healing, liberating and life-giving work of Christ which he does for each one of us as we progress in being shaped into his image. Saint Paul regarded it as part of his mission, so it is also our mission to fill up in compassionate love for all the redemptive work of Christ for the whole world. We do this by carrying on his mission of compassionate love which he entrusted to us, his disciples (Jn 20:21).

Part of my work is to suffer for you; and I am glad, for I am helping to finish up the remainder of Christ's sufferings for his body, the Church (Col 1:24).

What is not worthy to be loved in the person, I suffer. My evaluation of a person should not simply see his or her woundedness, but to see deeper. We can *not* overlook the fact that he or she is first and foremost God's only child, infinitely loveable and precious, no matter how distorted and deformed, egoistic and even violent the person may behave in the moment. Therefore, the permanent question will be: how do I look at people, particularly those who are least loveable: the violent, the terrorist, the evil ones, those filled with hatred and even self-destruction and contempt for all that is good and noble. Gradually, compassion will become *the* attitude with which I look at people and the whole world. I look at people the way God looks at them with a suffering love. In so doing, I will contribute something of what

Paul identifies as participation in Christ redemptive mission in the world which Jesus has entrusted to his disciples.

Who are our real friends?

Our friends are those who offer us comfort and consolation in moments of illness, of real suffering, of mental anguish, of distress and loneliness. They are the people who remain with us, who stay with us without saying anything or doing anything. It is this seemingly useless, humble and unpretentious presence in such moments that gives us consolation and comfort. They are the people who would like to say to us, *“I don't know what to say or what to do but I want you to realize that I am with you, that I will not leave you.”* Presence does not mean that I have to be useful. To say, *“I can't do anything for him or her anymore; I don't know what to say, what use can I be?”* is to miss the point. Anyone who stays with us, even if we are wrong, who suffers with us in our predicaments without accusing us, without moralizing, anyone who is just there, is our friend.

It is from this point of view that we have to look at the Bible and to see what it means to say our God is a *God with us*. He is a God who wants to be with us in our pain, miseries, loneliness, and anguish - situations where one can seemingly do nothing but simply be there. He wants to console and comfort us with his unpretentious presence. We have to understand the God of the Bible from such a perspective or we will never know who God really is. It seems that God wants to know our human condition fully; he wants to suffer all our miseries and pains with us. He does not want to take them away before he himself has tasted them to the dregs. Our God is not simply an all-powerful God but a compassionate God. This is the real mystery of Revelation. And if true friendship consists ultimately in being willing to give one's life for others, how much more does God want to be seen as a compassionate friend.

We should not forget true compassion is a gift of the Spirit who enables us to behave like Christ. I had to come to realize this in my encounter with Mother Teresa in Calcutta:

In the seventies I spent a short period in Calcutta working with the Sisters of Mother Teresa. That gave me the chance to observe Mother Teresa's daily activities at close range. On one of the first days I was assigned to a specific group of co-workers, and we accompanied two of the Sisters of Charity on their daily visit to the people in the slum, in which we were living.

There we found a man who was apparently without any more relatives and was lying half dead at the bottom of the rubbish dump. The Sisters explained to me that we would have to carry him to the house of the dying. At this moment something happened, which was to be very significant for the rest of my life. When I bent over the dying man to pick him up, he spat straight into my face. I backed up disgustedly. After the initial shock my emotional reaction was something like this, *“If you don't want that I help you, you can die in your own filth.”* But suddenly I realized with an almost painful clarity, that I had not bent over the poor man with true compassion, but rather with a condescending attitude, saying so to speak, *“You poor creature. I have come from a far away place, to get you out of this misery and the least I expect from you is a certain gratitude – and what do you do? You spit me in the face.”* It suddenly dawned on me, that it was not compassion that I showed, but rather a condescending kind of pity for his miserable situation and a covert display of my own virtue. This realization affected me deeply because I had always thought that I was a truly compassionate person.

Because I did not want to reveal this to the others, I did my utmost best to prove to them that I was a genuinely compassionate person. I lifted the man carefully on to the stretcher and brought him to the house of the dying. There I washed him and looked for the cleanest and best clothes I could find, put him to bed, fed him and cared for him with great love. This was basically to prove that I am a compassionate man with no trace of condescension.

Then the following happened: I began to consciously observe the Sisters in order to find out whether they could live and work with compassion day after day or whether they were like me. It was hard to find this out, until I experienced Mother Teresa and how she revealed to me her secret of genuine compassion. It was the moment when she was treating a young girl who was covered with painful sores all over her body. The child screamed and raved not allowing anyone to come close. Mother Teresa came, held the child by its arms and looked into her eyes with great compassion. She did not utter a single word, she only looked at the child and after a few moments lifted the girl up and cradled it in her arms – rocking it for an almost unbearably long time. Then she let go of the child and treated it. The child smiled at her all the time and allowed Mother Teresa to do what she wanted to do without taking her eyes off her.

Suddenly I understood the secret: she lived the compassion that Jesus demanded from his disciples when he said to them, “You should be as compassionate and merciful as my Father in Heaven is compassionate.” She was able to identify with the fear, the anxiety and the pain of the little girl and the girl knew it. From this day on I understood the secret of that woman. I knew that she was a saint and why people around her had begun to revere her as such. I knew why even non Christians saw in her God walking over the earth and prostrated them-selves before her. Mother Teresa had made the compassion of God her very own.

The question of how far I truly have become a disciple of the Lord will always be answered in the following question: “How compassionate a person am I?” The measuring stick of discipleship is Jesus demand, “You should be as compassionate as your Father in heaven is compassionate” (Lk 6:36). In all my experiences over the years, I came to realize once again an old truth: people will always judge a priest, a minister or a religious not on what they have achieved in their life in terms of great academic and pastoral performances or even great building skills. What they will remember lastingly is: was he or she a kind, loving and a compassionate person. People will forgive us many weaknesses and faults but not if we are hard, self righteous and non-compassionate. To be a disciple of Jesus means simply to *know* the shepherd and his love for his sheep.

A famous actor was invited to a function where he was asked to recite for the pleasure of the guests. Having recited a few common verses, he asked if there was anything in particular they wanted to hear. After a moment or two, an old pastor asked to hear Psalm 23, “*The Lord is my Shepherd*”. The actor paused for a moment and then said, “I will, but on one condition - that you will recite it also, after I have finished.”

The pastor was taken by surprise. “I’m hardly a public speaker, but if you wish, I shall recite too.” The actor began quite impressively. His voice was trained and his intonation was perfect. The audience was spellbound and when he finished, there was great applause from the guests. Now it was the old pastor’s turn to recite the same psalm. His voice was not remarkable, his tone was not faultless, but when he finished, there was not a dry eye in the room. The actor rose and his voice quivered as he said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I reached your eyes and your ears; he has reached your hearts. The difference is this: I know the Psalm but he knows the Shepherd.” (Arcodia)

I saw that all compassion, exercised in love,
is a mark of Christ’s indwelling. (*Julian of Norwich*)

Conclusion

The true image of God that Jesus came to bring us: a God who is unconditionally loving, ever forgiving and always compassionate with us, demands a new reading of the Bible: All scriptural texts must be read from the *center* of the whole Bible. This center is without doubt the God image of Jesus. Concretely and accurately expressed that means: all statements of the Bible have to be measured whether or not they resonate with the God-experience and the God-proclamation of Jesus. All words of the Bible ought to be

preceded by the Abba-Word of Jesus. Only from this God experience can the Bible be proclaimed and if needed be corrected. Alone from Jesus' clear and unconditional love can the Gospel be understood as Jesus intended it.

Such reading of the Bible may sound new for many readers. To adopt such a lens through which we read may not be easy. But this is, after all, the truth we cannot circumvent if we want to be honest with the sources of our faith. This truth will make us free - it will let us live with the Abba-God and 'to remain in his love.' After all, as Christians we owe it the world because the Abba-Jesus belongs not only to us but to the whole world. The principle of improving our Christian life is therefore, not *correction* through fear but through *persuasion* by presenting the Christian message in a way that people come to see and experience as the fundamental, all determining reality of their lives: that they are loved personally not just collectively. The result should be a deep joy and peace in the Lord and not fear of punishment and hell. The aim of all our spiritual life, of all pastoral planning and activity, must be to lead people to the fullness of life (John 10:10), to make them authentic, healed, restored and set free in the realization that the most basic fact about them is: they are loved beyond any imagination.

*God's passionate love for his people -for all of humanity-
is at the same time a forgiving love.*

It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice _

(Pope Benedict XVI: Deus Caritas est)