

A word can carry the essence of a person's life. Such is the case in today's Gospel story. St. Mark tells us that as Jesus disembarked from the boat on the other side of Lake Galilee and seeing the multitude of people anxiously waiting for him that "his heart was moved with pity for them" (Mk. 6:34). However, "pity" does not convey the full import of the original Greek of St. Mark's account. A more accurate rendering given in other translations is that Jesus "had compassion for them" (Mk. 6:34). What is at stake here is more than semantics.

Pity implies sorrow felt for another's suffering or misfortune; in itself, an admirable human response. However, pity can also connote, or actually be employed, as a form of slight or great contempt because its object is regarded as weak, inferior, or somehow deserving of its particular fate. Turning the blind eye, the closed heart ("Thank God it wasn't me" or "Poor thing, but what can you expect from people like him" or worst of all, "Well, in some ways they deserved what they got") are in fact, sins of abuse. It is such instances of "pity" exercised by the political and religious leaders of the day that is the cause of the scorn Jeremiah, and Jesus himself in John's Gospel. Such individuals reveal themselves as "false shepherds"—shepherds whose only interest is self-interest while perhaps offering condescending "pity" towards the suffering before returning to their own agendas.

Compassion, on the other hand goes beyond pity even in its best sense of sorrow felt for another's suffering or misfortune. Presently I am re-reading the book **Compassion: A Reflection On the Christian Life** written about thirty years ago by Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri Nouwen, the 20th century internationally renowned spiritual writer.

God's essence, these authors assert, as revealed by St. Mark in his description of Jesus' reaction at the sight of the crowd before him in today's gospel, is one of compassion. Compassion as its Latin root reveals is the response of "suffering with", of entering into the situation of pain, suffering and injustice, of the brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish of a fellow human being. In the mystery of the Incarnation, the

becoming human flesh in Jesus, God entered into the fullness of our condition, especially our brokenness, taking to himself the entirety of our human condition, including death. Only when fully emptied in death did God raise our humanity still bearing its wounds to glory in Jesus. As Jesus looked out on the crowd before him in today's gospel, he saw and felt the full burden of the nature he had come to share and redeem. God's compassion revealed in Jesus is not one that looks away from us, or asks us to look upward to the sky to seek relief, but rather, like the example of Jesus himself, one that invites us to look directly into our situation, to enter into it, and attempt to do what we can in the here and now to alleviate or eliminate the suffering we find and in the process discover God presence with us. The following true story illustrates this invitation of today's scriptures.

Father Ray Hermann was ordained as a priest for our archdiocese in 1957. Following the Second Vatican Council's call in the mid-1960s for priest abundant dioceses to offer priests for service to priest deficient areas of the world, Father Hermann volunteered and worked at our archdiocesan sponsored mission parish in Bolivia. Working particularly among the indigenous people, Father Ray daily confronted their great poverty and lack of basic human rights especially basic medical care at the hands of the wealthy and powerful landowners. Not a rabble rouser by any standards, Father Ray confronted this situation of injustice and worked with the help of supporters as well as the local indigenous plantation workers to assure that basic health care be accessible for people who had none. Father Ray and his collaborators built and obtained supplies for a small medical clinic which would offer free health care to all in need who came. During the night of the day the little clinic was dedicated and formally opened, Father Ray was beaten to death as he lay sleeping in bed. Later it was learned that hired thugs had been contracted by some of the wealthy landowners to get rid of the "troublesome priest." After a well-publicized arrest and "showcase trial" the murderers were sentenced to jail only to "mysteriously" escape a few months later never to be heard from again.

Father Ray was a good shepherd, a model of compassion in image of Jesus, and like him, invites us to the same witness of compassion.