

**“GOD’S COMPASSION”**

Once there was a very old man who used to meditate early every morning under a large tree on the bank of the Ganges River in India. One morning, having finished his meditation, the old man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the strong current of the river. As the scorpion was pulled close to the tree, it got caught in the long tree roots that branched out far into the river. The scorpion struggled frantically to free itself but got more and more entangled in the complex network of the tree roots.

When the old man saw this, he immediately stretched himself onto the extended roots and reached out to rescue the drowning scorpion. But as soon as he touched it, the animal jerked and stung him wildly. Instinctively, the man withdrew his hand, but then, after having regained his balance, he once again stretched himself out along the roots to save the agonized scorpion. But every time the old man came within reach, the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail that his hands became swollen and bloody and his face distorted by pain.

At that moment, a passerby saw the old man stretched out on the roots struggling with the scorpion and shouted: “Hey, old man. What’s wrong with you? Only a fool risks his life for the sake of an ugly, useless creature. Don’t you know that you may kill yourself to save that ungrateful animal?”

Slowly, the old man turned his head, and looking calmly in the stranger’s eyes, he said: “Friend, because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should I give up my own nature to save?”

I suppose in a sense, you can say that we are all scorpions with our nature to sting, to sin. So great is our nature to sting, that we caused the death of our Savior, Jesus Christ, our King and High Priest, who, together with his Father and the Holy Spirit, was guilty of showing compassion to their ungrateful creatures, showing great compassion to us!

Father Richard Veras, author of “Israel: Finding Christ in the Old Testament”, concisely, identifies the love and compassion that Jesus showed by his death on the cross. Father Veras does this by his commentaries on the “Seven Last Words of Christ.” Our Gospel reading for today only presents one of these last words, but the seven last words are:

1. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”
2. “Today you will be with me in paradise.”
3. “Woman, behold your son...behold, your mother.”
4. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
5. “I thirst.” [The only word expressed in today’s Gospel].
6. “It is finished.”
7. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

***“Father, forgive them...”***

The Gospel Canticle, in our Morning Prayer, informs us that St. John the Baptist, the Prophet of the Most High, will give to God’s people, the “knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.” The experience of mercy and forgiveness is the first evidence a person has that they are in the presence of something great, something beyond the world’s way of thinking, something which embraces and renews everything good and lovely. Forgiveness restores what is lost through weakness, forgetfulness or malice. Jesus died on the cross to restore everything that was lost through sin.

***“Today you will be with me...”***

If Jesus knows the depths of our betrayals, the depths of our sins, the depth of our stings, why does he want to forgive us? **Because he loves us!**

He delights in our presence. He does not want to live eternity without us, without loving and cherishing all that is in us. This last word is our invitation to come to the eternal wedding banquet. Jesus, with his face of love and compassion, is the origin and destiny of every Christian life.

***“Woman, behold your son...”***

Mary has already experienced the effect of Jesus’ saving presence: strangers become friends and family. She could have pondered the unexpected shepherds and wise men, who were first of her new family, and who were first to celebrate the birth of her son. She now stands before the cross with John, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, her extended family. Jesus’ presence in her life would continue through the face of John - a stranger that Jesus had once brought home for dinner. Christians would continue to experience the mercy, compassion and love of Christ through the faces of his friends, of their friends, the friends given to them to be “other Christs” along the way.

***“...why have you forsaken me?”***

The scorpion could have asked this question to the passerby, with his attitude of lack of concern, if the compassionate old man was not present. Jesus experienced the pain and loneliness and suffering along the way to his death on the cross. But Jesus was triumphant because of his certainty and confidence in his Father’s love.

Like the scorpion, we struggle amidst the roots of life. We experience the necessary pangs of labor and suffering. We experience the abandonment of others. But we are triumphant in Jesus and his promise of mercy and love that we encounter in the Body of Christ, His Church.

***“I thirst.”***

Just like the compassionate old man of our story, Jesus knows who we are, he knows about our stings, but he still wants to help us. He desires us and he thirsts for us. He has answered our lonely and painful hearts, full of unreciprocated love, full of voracious thirst for love, full of unquenchable desire for a truer, deeper, more complete love, with his compassionate and loving heart. The heart of Jesus was pierced to give us the lover’s gift of the cleansing water of Baptism and the cleansing blood commemorated and experienced in the Lord’s Supper.

***“It is finished.”***

Father Veras relates this last word to a marriage. The courtship may be finished, when the marriage is performed. But this does not represent an end to the relationship, the love and compassion that existed before the marriage. This is a beginning – the love that was spoken before has become a living and fruitful reality. The love that was promised is now actual. Jesus’ love for us is real. Today’s commemoration of His saving act expresses his limitless mercy and boundless affection. As in married life, Jesus’ compassion and love will be expressed for all time in the Church’s life and continually for all eternity. The dry wood of the cross becomes a life and love giving family tree.

***“Father...I commend my spirit.”***

Jesus’ death was not a leaving from something, but a going toward Someone. Mercy, friendship, compassion, hope leads us to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and the love that is expressed amongst them. Love and life has a compassionate face and that face belongs to Jesus. Jesus said “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Through his suffering and death, he proved it.

The story of the scorpion and the old man, poses a poignant question to us, as we live in a society full of sinners, of stinging scorpions. Why should we give up our nature to be compassionate even when we get stung in this biting, stinging world?

The story about the old man and the scorpion holds out a great challenge to a society in which we are made to believe that mutual struggle dominates our human development. It challenges us to show that to embrace is more human than to reject, that to kiss is more human than to bite, to behold more human than to stare, to be friends more human than to be rivals, to make peace more human than to make war, that compassion is more human than strife.

The cross shows us how to address these challenges and how to stay focused, through our love of God and obedience to His will.

Father Veras' prayer will help us seek endurance.

*“Lord Jesus,*

*Let your merciful gaze come upon me; love me back to life.*

*Help me joyfully to accept your every invitation.*

*Help me to welcome and love the “other Christs” you give me.*

*Let no darkness blind me to your promise of glory.*

*Give me the humility to flourish in the face of your love.*

*Fill me with your love that I may become one with you.”*

*You are my love, you are my way, you are my truth, you are my life.”*

*Amen.*