

World Vision Australia – Our Christian Identity

Statement 2 – Exercising the compassion of Christ

The exercise of compassion is an essential outworking of the identity of World Vision Australia (WVA) as a Christian organisation. It is shown most clearly in our relief work around the world. As we seek to respond to the many disasters that befall our world, we do so motivated by the unconditional love and compassion of Christ.

Compassion at the heart of God

Throughout the Bible, we find that compassion lies at the very core of the character of God. God is consistently described as loving, merciful, and compassionate. And throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we are commanded to imitate God's compassion for others. The prophet Micah tells us that God requires us to love mercy.¹ Similarly, Zechariah reminds us that God wants us to show mercy and compassion to one another². In the gospels, 'mercy' is one of the important matters of the law neglected by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees³; and Paul's letter to the Romans tells us to be cheerful in showing mercy.⁴

Compassion as knowing God

The call in the Bible to embody the compassion of God is so strong that it is equated with knowing God. Many Christians talk about having a personal relationship with God. This relationship provides meaning, purpose and joy to those who enter into it. It is accessible here and now and is not simply about 'going to heaven when we die.'

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah spoke about what it means to know God. Jeremiah praised the good king Josiah, declaring, "[Josiah] did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well." Jeremiah continues to speak the Word of the Lord, asking, "Is that not what it means to know me?"⁵

Salvation is for service. We are called to live out the compassion that Jesus showed throughout His ministry on Earth, and that He has also shown to us. Our service is empowered by the Spirit and has everything to do with joining with Him to renew the world. This is the foundation of the ministry of WVA.

To know God, according to the Bible, is to defend the cause of the poor and needy. It is to live out – to embody – the life of Jesus Christ, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.⁶

Compassion as part of the identity of WVA

The Christian Gospel is foundational to who we are as a Christian organisation. It permeates and forms our identity, and is manifested in our works of compassion. The gospels are full of Jesus expressing compassion for the outcast, the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. His compassion was unconditional, it was complete and it reflected the very nature of God. We see our role as seeking to be Christlike in our compassion for those who suffer.

¹ Micah 6:8

² Zechariah 7:9

³ Matthew 23:23

⁴ Romans 12:8

⁵ Jeremiah 22:15b-16

⁶ Colossians 1:19

The suffering of God

Rev. John Smith points out that compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live in someone else's skin.⁷ We see this played out in the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 in Mark's Gospel.⁸ In denoting Jesus' compassion for the crowds before He feeds them, the Greek verb indicates that He was 'moved in His innermost being or entrails', such was His ache for them. Compassion moves God to action, and it moves us likewise.

The principal way in which God shows His compassion for the world is by entering into it in the form of Jesus, who suffered and died for us. The compassion of God is seen in the suffering of Christ. God came and identified with our affliction. This is not a God who stands far-off, apathetic to the concerns of a world He has long abandoned. This is instead a God who enters in, who identifies and takes the burdens of the world on Himself. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, God is not a God who rules from above, but who carries from below.⁹ We are called to follow in the footsteps of this God. As Jesus has said, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you."¹⁰

Our response to this suffering God therefore is to share that pain with those who suffer. In response to the perennial question of where God is in the suffering of the world, we see God in the response to such suffering. This is our calling as a Christian aid and development organisation – to respond with compassion and without regard for the background of those who suffer. As the world undergoes a range of disasters ranging from floods, to drought, to earthquakes, we are determined to respond in the most compassionate manner possible. As we embrace the suffering of others in the name of Christ, we see the face of Christ in those who suffer.

While we may never know why suffering occurs in this world, what we do know is that the character of God is such that God also suffers over the brokenness that exists in the world. The founder of World Vision, Bob Pierce, prayed "let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God." Our response to suffering in the world is borne out of our response to the suffering of God, to that which breaks the heart of God.

Inspired by the example of the Christian movement

We are also inspired and encouraged by the response of followers of Christ throughout history. From the very first days of the fledgling Christian movement in the 1st century, through to the work of various aid and development agencies in the 21st century, it has been Christians who have been motivated by the compassion of Christ to respond as He did. The sociologist Rodney Stark explains that the primary reason for the explosion of growth of Christianity in the 1st century was because of their compassion for those whom society rejected.¹¹

We see this compassion played out in the book of Acts where we are told that the early believers organised themselves to ensure that widows were not being neglected in the daily

⁷ Smith, Rev. J., *Good News for Lepers*, sermon preached in 2006.

⁸ Mark 6:30-44

⁹ Moltmann, J., *The Crucified God: A Modern Theology of the Cross*, audio recording, <http://www.archive.org/details/TheCrucifiedGod>, accessed on 8 February 2011.

¹⁰ John 20:21

¹¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1996)

distribution of food.¹² From these humble beginnings 2000 years ago, we now have the situation whereby many of the world's largest aid and development agencies have Christian roots, inspired by the compassion of Jesus Christ.

This living out of the suffering compassion of Christ actually expresses our worship of Christ. As Pope John Paul II wrote, Jesus is the Redeemer in whose human being the suffering of God is revealed. And so the pain of God found full human expression in the crucified Christ.¹³ God relates to us in our pain. And, as we are to be imitators of Christ, we can relate to others in their pain, weeping with those who weep and mourning with those who mourn.¹⁴

Compassion as sacrifice

Compassion also involves sacrifice. The situations in which we work are often imbued with conflict of the most dangerous kind. If God has entered into our suffering in the humanity of Jesus, the least we can do is to follow in those footsteps. This is in fact what our worship of God entails. St Paul wrote to the Romans that their worship involved presenting themselves as a living sacrifice. He was writing to a church under persecution, a community who knew what it was to suffer. His advice to them in the midst of this was to let their love be genuine, to contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers.¹⁵ This was to define who they are in Christ. Theologian Karl Barth adds,

“No praise of God is serious, or can be taken seriously, if it is apart from or in addition to the commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”. Praise of God must always be understood as obedience to this commandment.”¹⁶

For Jesus and Paul, loving our neighbour inevitably involved sacrifice. Paul in fact continues his theme of the compassion of Christ throughout his letters,¹⁷ particularly with regards to the plight of the poor.¹⁸ Richard Rohr takes this point further by saying,

“God fills in the gaps of human deficiency by a great act of mercy and compassion, and the word for that great act for St. Paul is “Christ.” For him Christ is the name for God's great compassion, God's great plan, God's readiness to fill in the gaps of human sin, brokenness, poverty, and failure.”¹⁹

In the New Testament, worship and service go together. Love of neighbour is what true religion entails, as the letter of James tells us.²⁰ And for those in Jesus' time who wanted to legalistically question the definition of neighbour, He told the most famous parable of all, that of the Good Samaritan.²¹

¹² Acts 6:1-6

¹³ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem_en.html, accessed on 8 February 2011.

¹⁴ Romans 12:15

¹⁵ Romans 12:9,13

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I,2 The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1955, pp 401-402.

¹⁷ Romans 5, Philippians 1:8, 2 Corinthians 5, and Colossians 1:15-20 are just some examples of Paul's expression of the love and compassion of Christ.

¹⁸ For a detailed exposition on Paul's concern for the poor, see Longenecker, B., *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 2010

¹⁹ Richard Rohr, *The Great Themes of Paul: Life as Participation*, CD recording

²⁰ James 1:27

²¹ Luke 10:25-37

Compassion as our first response

The parable of the Good Samaritan shows that compassion is always Jesus' first response to people in need. There are those who would think of some people in poverty as 'undeserving' and would therefore classify people into the 'deserving' poor and the 'undeserving' poor. This is a not-so-subtle way of implying that we have no responsibility to assist those who are 'undeserving', as they are seen to have brought their situation on themselves. This attitude is radically counter to the approach of Jesus, who never condemned those who experienced suffering, and who certainly didn't take into account the circumstances that brought about their suffering. Jesus made this clear when he explained that the eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them were no more guilty of any sin than all the others living in Jerusalem²². It is only within *this* context that He warns His hearers to repent or they will also perish. If we are to model Jesus, compassion is to always be our first response. It is not our place to ask questions of the morality or otherwise of those to whom we are called to love. As Bevis says, "in a theology of development, no matter the circumstances, the poor will always sit at the table, and the meal will be life-giving for us all."²³

Part of the ethos of World Vision Australia is that we respond to people without regard to race, religion or gender. Just as Jesus treated women as equals in a day when women were regarded as second-class citizens²⁴, we also treat female and male as equal. Just as Jesus ate and drank with outcasts and the poor in a day when to be poor was an unmistakable sign of God's displeasure, we likewise seek to show compassion for the poor because God does. And just as Jesus showed a special regard for children in a day when children were not regarded as important, so we, as a Christian child-focused organisation, seek to show a special regard for children in their suffering.

The compassion of Christ reveals to us that it is incumbent on us to show the same unconditional love to those with whom we work. Our attempts to alleviate poverty in the world are performed purely out of love of God and neighbour. We love because He first loved us.²⁵ Our work is not done out of any ulterior motive of proselytising. Actions such as this arise out of insincerity and would therefore produce a disingenuous response from the people with whom we work. This would go against the very transformation we are seeking.

Compassion as holistic

We also recognise our works of compassion as central gospel issues. They are not optional 'add-ons' to the 'real' work of evangelism. Jesus lived a holistic life, healing people in every way. His acts of healing were not purely physical and they were not purely spiritual. They were not even both of these together. They were both of these and more. They also included social healing and the healing of one's identity. Jayakumar Christian refers to the 'marred identity' of the poor: "God goes beyond issues of justice and dignity to deal with the underlying marring of identity inherent in injustice and disempowerment."²⁶

²² Luke 13:4

²³ Bevis, S., 'Theology and Good Development', in *Changemakers Journal*, TEAR Australia, November 2010, p. 5.

²⁴ In Jesus' time, women were not allowed to testify in court and could not go out in public or talk to strangers. The Oxford Companion to the Bible says that "They had become second-class Jews, excluded from the worship and teaching of God, with status scarcely above that of slaves." (B.M. Metzger & M.D. Coogan, "The Oxford Companion to the Bible", Oxford University Press, New York, NY, (1993), P. 806 to 818).

²⁵ 1 John 4:19

²⁶ Christian, J., *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*, Marc Publishers, Monrovia, 1999, p. 216.

Our work of compassion involves healing the marred identity of the poor. The compassion of Christ touches every part of us. And in calling us to follow Him, we do our best to ensure that the compassion we show is also holistic. Our work is not only to deal with people's physical needs, but to heal their marred identity, to show them they are people of worth in the eyes of a compassionate God. This enables them to,

"lift up their heads and hold them high, to recognise their own dignity, to begin to see themselves in a new light. After their encounter with Jesus, they are transformed into people who know themselves to be God's children."²⁷

Compassion as proactive and responsive

Just as suffering comes in many forms, so compassion is also seen in different types of responses. In the occurrence of a natural disaster for instance, our first response is to the immediate survival needs of the people affected. Following this we may need to alleviate physical illness that may arise out of a lack of clean water and adequate sanitation. There is also the severe psychological and spiritual trauma that people in such situations suffer.²⁸ Such responses require us to be not only responsive, but also proactive. Just as Jesus did in the feeding of the four thousand²⁹, our work seeks to meet the real needs of people in their suffering which may not otherwise be seen.

Service and humility

Compassion is also about service and humility. God came among us as one who serves. This servant-leadership of Jesus was shown from the very beginning of His ministry. When He called His disciples, Jesus made Himself vulnerable by asking them to help Him in His ministry. This is where our work of compassion is linked to our development activities of working with God to renew the world. We have both the privilege and responsibility of participating in the work of God through the alleviation of poverty in acts of compassion and relief of suffering. Any act of compassion we undertake must be done in the spirit of servanthood and humility. We do not come thinking we have the answers. We come to respond, to learn and to partner with our brothers and sisters in their suffering. Boff reminds us that, "in every culture there will be buds, shoots of the reign, sacraments of grace, signs of the presence of the Word, and accents of the activity of the Spirit."³⁰

Jesus' approach to discipleship shows people dignity and power. He takes no account of the status or skills of those He calls. He accepts people as they are, with all their baggage, and bids them come and follow on the path of compassion with Him. Jesus is the initiator of what we do in serving the poor. This example inspires us to view our work with the poor as a partnership. Bevis reminds us that

"we should learn from the servant nature of Christ to encourage those who are poor to take the lead in determining what shape our covenant of development takes"³¹

²⁷ Bosch, D.J., "Mission in Jesus' Way: A Perspective from Luke's Gospel." *Missionalia* 17, no. 1 (1989): 8 (3-21 for Bibliography), in Christian, J., 1999, p. 188.

²⁸ As approximately 84% of the communities with which WV works have a spiritual or religious foundation to their lives, it is incumbent on us to address the spiritual needs of these people in their suffering.

²⁹ Matthew 15:32

³⁰ Leonardo Boff, *Good news to the poor* (Wellwood, Burns and Oates, 1992), 30

³¹ Bevis, S., November 2010, p. 4.

Conclusion

It is the love of God in Jesus Christ that is our ultimate motivation for the acts of compassion in which we engage. The Book of Acts tells us that Jesus “went about doing good”³² He was known as a “friend of sinners”³³ who freely associated with the poorest of the poor. All people are made in the image of God, with full dignity and inherent rights to be treated as such. In carrying out this work we are participating with God in the bringing in of the kingdom of God. And we are encouraged that all our acts of compassion, kindness and relief matter.³⁴

To the mystery of what God does about the suffering in the world, we can say that God has shown the utmost compassion in acting decisively in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And as the Father has sent Him, so He sends us.³⁵ At WVA, our works of compassion are seen in our response to situations such as earthquakes, floods, and famine. To find out more about our relief work, and to see how you can participate in bringing the compassion of Christ to our suffering world, click [here](#). Empowered by His Spirit, we do our utmost to follow in His footsteps.

³² Acts 10:38

³³ Luke 7:34

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:58

³⁵ John 20:21