

## **Cultivate Compassion! – A literary and biblical perspective**

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**Abstract:** The concept of cultivating compassion among people is quite prevalent among the writers of past and present particularly among English writers. Man is a wolf to man (*Homo homini lupus*) is an old Latin proverb. Man seems to be like a wolf, being predatory, cruel, and inhuman, more like an animal than civilized. Men prey on other men. They carry with them the smack and smell of Shylock and become ‘inhuman wretches, incapable of pity, void and empty from any dram of mercy’<sup>1</sup>.

This violent perversity of mankind is expressed elegantly by Shakespeare: Tumultuous wars shall confound kin with kin and kind with kind; disorder, horror, fear and mutiny...and this land be called the field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls <sup>2</sup>. Research scholars say that 20<sup>th</sup> century has been phenomenally wild natured and predatory and it is estimated that the rulers have exterminated 262 million of their own subjects. It evokes another famous line from Shakespeare, when Mark Anthony promises revenge for Caesar’s assassination: “Cry ‘Havoc’, and let slip the dogs of war” <sup>3</sup>. The human nature has always been wild, wolf-like, self-serving, lustful and murderous.

The point of our discourse veers on these questions. Can man become gentle like a lamb, instead of unleashing unprecedented terror and destruction? Will there be a peaceful world of tomorrow where man will no longer be allowed to be wolf to man? Will the lovely saying ‘man is a lamb to man’ (*homo homini agnus*) replace the ancient Latin proverb ‘man is a wolf to man’ (*homo homini lupus*)? Is it possible to see the fulfilment of the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them? The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy my entire holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” <sup>4</sup>. ‘The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy. His wrath will come to an end; he will not be angry for ever. He does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults; for as the heavens are high above the earth so strong is his love for those who fear him. (Psalm. 102)

**Key words:** Compassion, in its Latin root meaning (*compatir*) signifies ‘to suffer with’, ‘to be patient with’, ‘to weep with those who weep’; ‘*homo homini lupus*’(‘man is a wolf to man’); ‘*homo homini agnus*’(‘man is a lamb to man’).

**Introduction:** The creative genius of the world, Shakespeare in his last play ‘The Tempest’ has nothing but the theme of compassion, reconciliation and peace, in the backdrop of vendetta, revenge, hostility and hatred. Prospero preaches nothing but compassion and forgiveness, even though he has been harmed beyond description by his brother. He declares:

‘The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance’

Compassion demonstrates the best of humanity. It gives us faith that good people still exist when others choose less wisely. It reminds us to show genuine kindness to others, selflessly and fearlessly. As the Dalai Lama once said, “Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.”

*King Lear* is an incredibly cruel play, and many of the characters are absolutely pitiless. Yet a few characters show extraordinary sympathy towards others' suffering. The human capacity to feel for others survives even the most desperate of moments. Yet what we see in *Lear* is that compassion is usually based on some sort of obligation—such as loyalty or family ties. Interestingly, these loyalties and these ties are the same causes of the extensive treachery displayed in *King Lear*. By compassion, one means moments when characters show kindness, mercy, and similar qualities. These actions can draw us closer to those characters, move us to tears, and make those stories all the more memorable. And during these turbulent times in our world, finding – and writing – stories that demonstrate compassion may be more important than ever. In the subplot of the play, we come across the Earl of Gloucester. Believing his bastard son, Edmund, he disowns his legal and innocent son Edgar who goes about in disguise as a poor beggar John to avoid getting killed by his own father’s fury. But the tragedy is that his eyes are couched by his own wicked bastard son, Edmund. In fact, he stumbled when he saw. He failed to discern the good and bad when he literally saw. With the loss of his eyes, he moves out of his castle in his desperation to commit suicide. At that moment, his own legal son Edgar comes to show his love and compassion to his father who did more harm than any good. He prevents him from his idea of ending his life at Dover beach. He exhibits his acts of compassion to his father and strikes a positive approach to accept the challenges of life in those immortal words of encouragement:

*Men must endure their going hence*

*Even as their coming here*

*Ripeness is all. 5*

**The necessity of cultivating compassion:** What is overwhelmingly prevalent in the present scenario today is the socio-economic inequality in humanity. Some are extremely poor, marginalised and suffer untold misery in life, whereas some others live in the lap of luxury without having an iota of compassion for their unfortunate fellowmen. To prove this point one reads the parable of Lazarus and the rich narrated by Lord Jesus in the Bible 6. The rich man known in Latin as Dives is stonily indifferent to the suffering of the poor man Lazarus at his gate. Clothed in purple and fine linen, he feasted in luxury every day. He was like a glutton and a gourmet feeding on exotic and costly dishes. He is a figure of indolent self-indulgence. After eating with his hands, Dives cleansed his hands by wiping them on hunks of bread, and then threw away the bread. It was that bread Lazarus was waiting for. He was a beggar. He was covered with ulcerated sores. So helpless was he that he could not even ward off the street dogs which pestered him. He was the picture of abject poverty. Such is the scene in this world. And when both died, the change is altogether different. What is the sin of Dives? He did not order poor Lazarus to be removed from his gate nor did he object to Lazarus receiving the crumbs that were flung from his table. He did not kick Lazarus in the passing. He was not deliberately cruel to him. But he never noticed Lazarus and thought it perfectly natural and inevitable that Lazarus should be in pain and hunger, while he wallowed in luxury. He had no compassion for poor man. He had no pity or mercy that could pierce his heart. He looked at a fellow man, hungry and in pain and did nothing about it. He was heartless, cold and completely indifferent to the less fortunate, the marginalized represented by poor Lazarus. That is why Lazarus after death was in glory. He was taken to the bosom of Abraham in heaven and Dives was in torment in hell with a huge gulf between them. The parable of Dives and Lazarus is a grim reminder for everyone to be concerned with our fellowmen and cultivate nothing but compassion and love.

### **God's Compassion in Milton's *Paradise Lost* - Book III:**

Milton observes that sin is the first child of Satan, brought to life by Satan's disobedience. Since Satan is the first of God's creations to disobey, he personifies disobedience, and the fact that Sin is his daughter suggests that all sins arise from disobedience and ingratitude

toward God. To those who behold her birth, she is first frightening but then seems strangely attractive, suggesting the seductive allure of sin to the ordinary individual. Sin dwells alone and in utter torment, representing the ultimate fate of the sinner. And death is sin's offspring indicating Milton's belief that death is not simply a biological fact of life but rather a punishment for sin and disobedience, a punishment that nobody escapes.

In Book III of *Paradise Lost* (lines 138- 265) God with his Son sitting at his right hand has been watching the events in Hell after the fall of Satan. He sees Satan flying up toward the new Earth and the first parents of mankind living in their pristine state of innocence in the Garden of Eden known as Paradise. At the same time, he sees everything that will happen because of it, perceiving past, present, and future simultaneously. He sees that man will fall, of his own fault, because God gave him free will—yet without that will, man would not be capable of sincere love. Man would merely go through the motions. While it would be just to punish man for his own actions, God determines that He will act primarily out of love and mercy. The Son, full of compassion, praises God for his kindness toward man, but asks how mercy can be given without destroying justice. God answers that a suitable sacrifice must be made: someone worthy must offer to die to pay for man's sin. The angelic choirs are silent, but the Son immediately offers himself. He will become mortal so that God can yield to Death and conquer Hell. God is overjoyed, even though he will be giving up his son, because he knows that it is good to sacrifice his son for the salvation of the human race, in order for justice and mercy to be served. Those that have faith in the Son will be redeemed, but those who do not accept grace will still be doomed to Hell. The choirs of angels now break into a song of praise extolling the goodness of both Father and Son, which will turn a sorrowful deed into greater glory for both God and man.

**Biblical perspective to Compassion:** The Holy Scripture is the source and spring for all great writers in English Literature. The most beautiful text known as 'everybody's text' is John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" God is not like an absolute monarch who treats each man as a subject to be reduced to an abject obedience. God is the Father who cannot be happy until his wandering children have come home. God does not smash men into submission. He yearns over them and woos them into love. It was the world that God so loved. It is the world consisting of the unlovable and the unlovely, the good and

the bad, the man who rests in the love of God and the man who spurns the love of God, inclusive of one and all. As Augustine says, "God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love. The sending of Christ into the world was a gift of pure, undeserved grace. That one great sin (the fall of Adam) which was committed in a place and state of life of such happiness with the result that the whole human race was condemned originally and, so to say, at root in one man, is not undone and washed away except by the one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus, who alone was able to be born in such a way that he had no need to be reborn."<sup>7</sup> He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross! **8.**

**God is compassionate but just:** In creating the world God combined the two attributes of justice and mercy. Justice is tempered with mercy and loving kindness. In the parable of the wheat and the weed, the man sowed only good seed in his field. The servants of the man reported that the weeds had grown up in the field along with the wheat, and wished to pluck them up. 'Do you want us to go and gather them?' No, replied the master; let both grow together until the harvest and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn' **9.** In this parable you see, on the one hand, the patience with which God treats sinners; and on the other, the rigour with which He chastises the obstinate and the corrupt. St. Augustine says that the devil deludes men in two ways by despair and hope. After the sinner has offended God, the enemy, by placing before his eyes the terror of Divine justice tempts him to despair; but before he sins, the devil encourages him to sin with the hope of Divine mercy. Hence the Saint gives to all the following advice: "After sin, hope for mercy; before sin, fear justice."

God is merciful, but he is also just. Mercy is promised, not to those who abuse it, but those who fear God. "And His mercy, said the Divine Mother, to those that fear Him" **10.**

**Perception of God's compassion and justice by great saints:** Beware, says St. John Chrysostom, when the devil, not God, promises you Divine mercy, that he may induce you to commit sin. Miserable the man who abuses the mercy of God to offer new insults to His majesty! St. Bernard says that Lucifer's chastisement was accelerated, because he rebelled against God with the hope of escaping punishment. King Manasseh sinned; he afterward repented, and obtained pardon. His son Ammon, seeing that his father's sins were so easily forgiven, abandoned himself to a wicked life with the hope of pardon: but for Ammon there was no mercy. Hence, St. John Chrysostom asserts that Judas was lost because he sinned

through confidence in the benignity of Jesus Christ. In fine, God bears, but He does not bear forever. Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are that go in there (Matt. 7:13). According to St. Augustine one who offends God with the hope of pardon is a scoffer, not a penitent'. But St. Paul tells us that God does not allow Himself to be mocked. (Gal. 6:7) To continue to offend God as often and as long as the sinner pleases, and afterward to gain Heaven, would be to mock God. God curses the man who sins with the hope of mercy. The hope of sinners after sin is pleasing to God, when it is accompanied with repentance. But the hope of the obstinate is an abomination to the Lord. **11**

**Conclusion:** Compassion includes awareness, caring, concern and “to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with God” **12**. Compassion knows no borders or racial or religious differences. It perceives suffering of any kind in order to make things better. It is the quality that drew thousands of people to Jesus in his lifetime and ironically it is the lack of compassion that drives thousands of people away from his followers today!

We need to become vertical thinkers to transform ourselves spiritually into God’s loving divine nature filled with the knowledge about Him and His way of life like the waters covering the sea beds. This change is absolutely necessary for man’s destiny. With the outbreak of the corona pandemic, the whole world is under stress, gets locked down, defensive, protective. We must therefore turn to God who is all compassion and love. God is talking to us that our life in this world is fragile and brief. We must believe in him, depend upon him. He is always the sovereign and takes absolute control of the world. We need to turn to him, depend on him, love him and be kind and generous to our fellowmen by cultivating compassion. We must weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, displaying nothing but good will. As the French critical genius Voltaire proclaimed, “It is time for us to cultivate our garden”**13**. The compassion that existed in the early church reached new heights in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Church shared in relieving the unfortunate. Almsgiving was universal. Men hopeful of paradise left charitable bequests. Doles of food were distributed three times a week to all who asked. In one aspect the Church was a continent-wide organization for charitable aid. St. Francis of Assisi has been so marked in history for his gentleness, disinterestedness, simplicity and forgiveness of enemies and he lived like another Christ. Even Mahatma Gandhi followed the teachings of the Christ, with regard to loving one’s enemies and praying for your persecutors. He did not mouth the name of Christ, but acted as if he accepted every word on the Sermon on the Mount **14**. (Will Durant)

### Works Cited

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4. Isaiah. 11:6 – 9
5. Shakespeare. *King Lear*: Act 5 sc.2
6. Luke 16:19 –31
7. Saint Augustine. *Confessions*: Section 75
8. Philippians 2: 8
9. Matthew 9: 24 – 30
10. Luke 1: 50
11. Job.11: 20
12. Micah 6: 8
13. Voltaire. *Candide*: Il faut cultiver notre jardin
14. Will Durant. *The Story of Civilization* volume 1