

## Empathy and Jesus

To show empathy is to identify with another's feelings, to put oneself in the place of another. It presupposes an awareness of self and one's own feelings. For us, showing empathy indicates a mature self-differentiated individual rather than a disordered, perhaps selfish or narcissistic personality.

Jesus, however, belongs to a world in which humans are public not private entities. Jesus' identity is socially constructed. Through the exchange between Jesus and the disciples in the middle of Mark's gospel, "Whom do people say that I am?" followed by, "Whom do you say that I am?" Jesus indicates that social groups, whether people or outsiders or disciples, construe his identity publicly. Jesus does not have a separate private identity in the gospels.

Thus, when people describe Jesus as self-differentiated or the incarnation as the best demonstration of Jesus' empathy for the human condition, they are viewing Jesus' personality or manifestation of divinity through modern judgments about what constitutes healthy human identity, relationships and God's involvement with the created order.

Such assessments tell us far more about the people making them than they do about Jesus. They also enable episodes in the gospels to resonate beyond their first century context. Thus a disadvantaged young person who feels a particular empathy for the plight of underprivileged children today overlooked by society, the welfare state, and even by their parents, might resonate deeply with the story of the boy Jesus in the temple, neglected by and separated from his parents for three days. He could connect with how difficult it might have been for Jesus to return to Galilee with his parents and to obey them without resentment given that they had not noticed he was missing, had assumed he was with other family members who had traveled to Jerusalem, and had berated him when they finally found him in the temple being concerned with the more important business of his Father. When such a young man feels understood by someone outside his dysfunctional family, namely, an imagined Jesus, this particular gospel story offers hope for wholeness and healing in fractured families.

But there are general ideas of social affinity in the New Testament and other ancient texts. African American scholars alert Eurocentric readers like myself to readings of biblical figures whose geographical roots and ethnic heritage we might otherwise overlook, but which nonetheless resonate with ancient readers. Clarice Martin points out that the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 embodies Luke's theme of universalism, while A. Smith proposes that Luke describes the Eunuch as a paradigm of Ethiopian wealth, wisdom and military might designed to solicit readers' empathy and imitation.

In the central section of the gospel, to which I alluded at the beginning of this article, Mark presents Jesus' collective identity three times as the suffering Son of Man whom true disciples imitate by following and taking up their cross. Three times they misunderstand, and each time they are corrected. As a counterpoint to this teaching, Jesus

encounters a rich man whose possessions impede progress towards the kingdom. In response to his question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus lists the commandments including the injunction not to defraud. The young man declares that he has kept all these things from his youth. Then the narrative records, "Jesus, looking intently at him, loved him and said, "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me." Jesus' additional demand is not a dismissive trap but stems instead from a deep desire to free the man from "the cares of the world and the delight in riches which enter in like thorns and choke the word" (Mark 4:19). Jesus perceives, both narratively and personally, the impossible challenge his words pose. And his perception proves correct: at Jesus' word, the man's face fell, and he went away grieving, for he was unwilling to give up his many possessions. Jesus' reaction empathizes with the rich man's plight. He does not judge. "Looking around, Jesus said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God.'" Mark's community, even as they are laying up treasure in heaven, takes this saying to heart for the disciples exclaim, "Then who can be saved?" This occasions Jesus' second intense observation in the passage this time of the disciples: "With humans it is impossible but not with God: for all things are possible with God."

When I read Mark's words, "Jesus, looking intently at him, loved him" I visualize Jesus looking at someone who has, like himself, kept all the commandments, and who nonetheless feels there must be something more he can do. Perhaps Jesus' family was wealthier than we imagine, and Jesus gave that all up for his ministry, and is still looking for what more he can do. Mark describes tensions between Jesus and his family of origin early in the gospel. This would explain why his mother and siblings thought he had gone mad.

Mark's Jesus looks intently at the rich man and at the disciples to perceive whether they like he can live out the challenge of discipleship. Some cannot. Jesus is sympathetic to their difficulties. Perhaps he lived out this challenge personally. After all, he told the parable of the Sower at the beginning of the ministry to demonstrate that much seed will not fall on good soil: it will instead be snatched away by Satan or not have enough root to withstand tribulation and persecution or it will be choked by cares of the world or delight in riches.

Deirdre Good