

## **Report from Philosophy group for Forum and website**

Glen Scrivener's book 'The Air We Breathe' had been recommended as a starting point for discussion on several aspects of life today.

He contends that modern values such as equality, compassion, consent, enlightenment, science, freedom and progress are not natural and universal, but have been brought about by the Christian revolution.

We chose to examine **compassion** first, and defined it as:

- a strong feeling of sympathy or sadness for those suffering, resulting in offering help through action;
- a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress, together with a desire to alleviate it;
- taken from the Latin 'com': together with, and 'pati': to suffer, compassion means 'suffering with'.

We chose to research compassion as practised before Christ, and after Jesus.

### **Pre-Christian compassion:**

It soon became clear that there was a lot of evidence of compassion well before Christianity came about. A growing body of evidence suggests that both human beings and other animals have an inbuilt "compassionate instinct." A number of pre-Christian religions such as Buddhism and Judaism place compassion very high up in their priorities and both ancient Greece and ancient Rome worshipped goddesses of compassion. Ancient philosophers such as Confucius and Socrates both valued compassion highly, even though many of the practises carried out then would be, in today's thinking, barbaric. There was a great deal of discussion about that and what in perhaps 1000 years' time people might consider barbaric in our customs and practises.

**Compassion since Jesus:** Scrivener opens this chapter by quoting Richard Dawkins (an outspoken atheist), 'a woman should abort a faulty foetus and try again.' (2014)

Several philosophers have written about compassion, and we noted that Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) declared that compassion is the main drive towards ethical behaviour, and as other people aren't external to me, I should care about them. Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) said that pity needs to be overcome as it 'thwarts the law of evolution, which is the law of selection.'

This led us to define the difference between pity and compassion (the latter taking action in response to others' distress).

Scrivener argues that compassion comes from another realm than what is natural, the 'super-natural'. Much of the teachings of Jesus in the gospels is based on the story of the Good Samaritan, 'go and do likewise'.

More discussion to come in our future meetings. We would love you to join us!

Our next meetings are on **Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> May** (when we will be looking at Equality) and **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> June** (Science) at **10am until 12noon at Enterprise House.**

**Jenny Lee and Ruth Sansom**