

Trinity 6 - Beatitudes 6

08/07/18 18:30

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." (Matt 5:7)

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

...

It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice..."

So says Portia, the romantic heroine in Shakespeare's *the Merchant of Venice*.

Rachel in her sermon this morning reminded us that the dictionary defines mercy as "compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm". I want us to explore those two qualities mentioned in that definition: Compassion and Forgiveness.

Firstly, mercy requires the feelings and actions of compassion. To be compassionate requires both body and heart. It is seeing another persons plight, and having sympathy for them, having concern for their plight, and even offering to help them. Compassion is something the Bible speaks a lot about. The promise of God to his people Israel was often couched in terms of compassion. The prayers of the Israelites when they felt abandoned in exile was for God to be compassionate on them. Matthew tells us that Jesus saw the crowds following him, who were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, and he had compassion on them. When healing the sick, Jesus was often quoted firstly as having compassion on the people.

And we read in the parable of the Prodigal Son, that as the son returns to his father, "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Responding to human need in others seems to be at the heart of what mercy means. But compassion is not just for humanity. The Bible tells us of God's compassion to us. It speaks often of how God's heart is moved by the plight of his people. "But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them" (2 Kings 13:23).

But there is more to Mercy than compassion. To obtain mercy, and to be merciful, are profoundly related to forgiveness and being forgiven. For most of us, our experience of forgiveness is patchy. We all carry with us hurts from the past. Some of us have experience of being forgiven, or forgiving others, particularly of significant hurt. But many of us are still too weighed down by the past, but others peoples actions towards us, or the inability to forgive ourselves.

Forgiveness asks us to consider whether, as Christians: we forgive because God forgives us, or whether we must first forgive in order for God to forgive us. In fact I want to suggest both.

Think of the Lord's Prayer - both in Matthew and Luke's versions. Matthew 6 says "forgive us" our sins "as we forgive" the sins of others. Whilst Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer reads "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us". There is a connection between our ability to forgive, and God's forgiveness of us. We are called to be people of forgiveness, or mercy, that we might know of God's forgiveness and mercy. "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" we heard in our Gospel tonight.

But Jesus also tells the story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18. He was forgiven by his master, but then refused to forgive those who owed him a debt. Jesus is trying to teach us that we can forgive because of our own experience of forgiveness. Or in the words of John, "We love, because he first loved us".

So compassion and forgiveness lie at the heart of mercy. To show them is often very challenging. To receive them can be equally challenging. But the alternative is self-destruction, through nursing grudges or seeking revenge. We look to countries with long standing conflicts, like Northern Ireland, to see how such grievances are passed from generation to generation, and become such a destructive force in the lives of people and societies. Those who show mercy escape these cycles. And they are blessed by God. They are filled with God's joy, and will know of God's mercy because of their own. May we find the courage in our own lives to be merciful, and to receive mercy from others. |