

Rich in mercy

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10

*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:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*

Portia's famous speech from the Merchant of Venice offers some of the attributes of mercy, which brings blessing, and is an, 'attribute to God himself', and humanity might most be like God when we learn to season our justice and judgements with mercy.

Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said: "I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice."

Mercy, the balance to justice. Mercy, not the erasure of justice but the balance to justice. It is one of the vital parts of our Christian faith. Knowing that we are judged for faults and failings and weaknesses, but realising and believing that we are judged by a merciful God, Who reminds us that there are consequences to all of our actions, and we have to make amends, and turn around, and try again and try harder, but that His way is not ultimately one of irredeemable judgement, but of unequivocal mercy. A few Sundays ago I preached on the image of the rainbow in the Noah

story, and for days afterwards that beautiful symbol appeared over our city as sunshine and rain combined in nature to remind us not only of God's love but of God's mercy. I wondered who amongst us needed to see it? In medieval churches there was a tradition to paint murals featuring Doomsday. That must have been cheery to look at during the longer sermons. The painting would include images of the people of the world being gathered before Christ in Judgement. An angel would be reading from the Book of Judgement. The faithful and kindly were shown being shepherded into heaven by smiling angels. The sinners and reprobate were shown being prodded by demons, not quite in hell yet, but getting closer to the burny, burny fires. Over them all was painted the figure of Jesus sitting in judgement, looking out at the gathered world before Him. He is painted seated on a throne of judgement, but the throne He sits on is a rainbow. With Jesus, there is judgement, but there is also the hope of mercy.

In the letter to the Ephesians, from the school of Paul, we read, God is rich in mercy. It is a wonderful image. In a world which so often feels pinched and penny-watching, this lavish extravagance of God's mercy is as overwhelming as it is unsettling. Would God do this for us, show mercy? Would God do this for us, show such unboundaried, unequivocal love, which we could never earn, and don't always deserve? In a word, yes. Actually, in two words. Yes: Jesus. Jesus came not to judge the world without hope, but to judge the world in order that we would: know the difference between right and wrong; know the difference between what is just and what is unjust; know the difference between hope and despair; know the difference between love and hate; know the difference between light and dark; know the difference between life and death. And not only know the difference, live by the knowledge and the feeling and the belief that this 'salvation', this having been lost but now being found, is the incredible gift that Jesus offers to us when we turn to Him and follow Him.

Maybe no bad thing to focus on, on this Laetare Sunday. Rejoice, be glad, because our God, rich in mercy, out of the great love He has for us, is determined to give us life, give us hope, give us strength, give us love. When our world, any world, feels like it is going to hell in a hand cart, when nothing seems or feels or is right, despite everything God, rich in mercy, out of the great love He has for us, will come again, and again, and again, to work with us to turn things around.

Through His mercy and great love, we find forgiveness, and are given grace, to start again just when we thought it wasn't going to be possible, or wasn't worth our while because, do you know, the world isn't good enough, and we can do better. Through our faith in God's mercy and great love for us, we are inspired to do the good works that God has prepared us for, so that we may live, and share this better way of life. Our faith is shown in how we behave towards others, towards God, towards ourselves by the kindness and graciousness and the mercy we show to others. This salvation, this mercy, this endless hope is not so much a reality we need to analyse all the time, and dissect what it might mean, rather it is something to be celebrated and praised. And on a Laetare Sunday, in the midst of leaden Lent, in the midst of the phoney war leading up to a General Election where it's not clear anyone has any sustainable solutions to make our country better; in the midst of a real war where Israelis and Palestinians, Ukrainians and Russians, and God knows who else and where else are dethroning love and harming all of humanity; in the midst of all that this God of ours, rich in mercy, says to us, 'Don't give up; work together; keep steady; there is still blessing, still light, still hope. Enough, maybe just enough, to see you through.'

It starts with mercy, our acceptance of God's love that will set you free from the things that weigh us down. The hurts and the pains and the frustrations and the grief and the anger and the resentment and the disappointment and the fear. Sets you free from the things that others have done to you, and that you have done to others. Because that is how big God's mercy is. It is how

big God's mercy needs to be. Rich in mercy. Not drop by grudging drop, but a tidal wave of mercy to refresh and cleanse and bring life.

If you want to receive God's mercy, when you receive God's mercy, there ought to be a response in return. How merciful are you in your treatment of others, and in the treatment of yourself. Are you big enough, brave enough, to show mercy, to say, "I forgive," and let the hurt go, and move on? Or are you like Tam o'Shanter's wife Kate, a sulky, sullen dame, gathering your brows, like gathering storm, nursing your wrath to keep it warm?

'But I don't feel like forgiving', you say. I can't forgive what she did. I can't forgive what he said. Sometimes we become so accustomed to the callouses and scars of our wounded souls that we can't let them go because they have become part of our personality. In our merciless state, we harbour our grudges, we re-enact the scenes and episodes of betrayal and unkindness and cruelty, which are real enough, and can't quite let them go because they've become like a bitter security blanket whose cancerous tatters, if disposed of, will leave us vulnerable, and we don't know what there is to hold on to. Does any of this, some of this, strike an echo for you, making you look inward and down into what you are, and who you have been?

Who could make a difference? How is a change ever going to be possible. Who'd be brave enough, foolish enough, strong enough to sort us out?

Step forward our God, rich in mercy, Who loves us. Even when we were unlovely and unlovable; especially when we by considered intent, or casual cruelty, exposed a side of ourselves that was just about as far away from salvation and Christian decency as could be. But there God is, with the vaults of heaven's rich mercy open to us. Speaking salvation. Speaking hope. Speaking steadfastly, as the Psalmist wrote, into every darkness. Saving us from distress and healing us. Giving us a new

beginning, again. God doesn't seem to mind how often He has to do it. We're worth it, even when we forget. Even when we are ungrateful. Even when our hard little hearts resist and resist until they can resist no more, and the sheer volume of God's merciful love washes all over us, all over this city, all over this country, all over this world.

How much mercy is needed to save all of that? Lots, but God is rich in mercy. How much mercy is it going to take to heal Ukraine and Russia? Lots, but God is rich in mercy. How much mercy is it going to take to get Israeli and Palestinians to see that this spiral of evil and cruelty has to stop in the name of humanity? Lots, but God is rich in mercy. How much mercy is it going to take to reorientate our political world towards serving the nation? Lots, but God is rich in mercy. How much mercy is it going to take to give you the new start and the new beginning and the strength to face whatever it is that lies ahead for you in your life? Lots, but God is rich in mercy.

Pope Francis said: "A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just."

Come in from the cold, and warm yourself beside God.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love for us...might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus...it is the gift of God."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen