

PARABLES OF MERCY IN THE GOSPEL

(First presented by Willy Effinger in April 2016)

In "Misericordiae Vultus", which is the proclamation of the extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis wrote: "With our eyes fixed on Jesus and His merciful gaze, we experience the love of the Most Holy Trinity. Everything in Him speaks of mercy. Nothing in Him is devoid of compassion."

To Saint Faustina, the Lord said that He is Mercy Itself, Mercy Incarnate". The Holy Trinity is Mercy, made somewhat understandable and tangible through Jesus. He was born for this mission of mercy and empowered by the Holy Spirit to reveal the very love that pours itself out to every soul on earth. No one will ever be excluded.

Pope Francis invites us to delve a little deeper into the mystery of God's mercy by looking a little closer at the parables since they are the core of the Gospel and of our faith. Mercy is presented in the Gospels through parables as a life-changing force that can overcome every obstacle. Jesus, by telling us the parables, shines the light of truth on the Father who never tires to forgive the wrong with an outpouring of compassion and mercy. If we listen carefully and read the parables with an open mind, we will most likely find something of us in each one of the stories and hopefully come to the conclusion that we must also make some changes. Before Jesus even spoke of mercy, He personified it!

"Son, they have no wine" – and He gave them wine!

"Moved with pity, He stretched out His hand and healed the leper!"

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" - and he was healed of his blindness.

"If I only can touch the hem of His garment, I will be healed" - and she was!

"Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone" - and out of compassion He freed her from her sinful life.

It goes on and on – His encounters with the sick of body, heart and mind are one hundred percent guided by mercy. The word mercy is perhaps the most frequently used word in Holy Scripture to make us aware of who Jesus is. After He showed us "mercy in action", Jesus made one bold life-changing statement: **"Be merciful as Your Father is merciful."** For the people of His time, this statement must have raised tremendous concerns. The Jewish people understood the mercy of God but to assume that a person could be like the heavenly Father in any of His attributes was unthinkable. We need to examine this statement as well. Is it possible to ever become as merciful as our Father in Heaven? Secondly, why should we be like Him?

In the Gospel according to Luke, which has been called the "Gospel of Mercy", we can most likely find the answers to those questions. So, let us look at the "Mercy Parables": in chapter 7, we find the two debtors and their creditor; in chapter 10, we are introduced to the Good Samaritan; in Chapter 15, we find three of the most well known parables: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son; in Chapter 18, we find the unjust judge and the persistent widow, as well as the Pharisee and the Publican in the temple. But that is not all; all of Luke's writings are woven through with mercy in different ways. It becomes necessary to examine these angles and aspects of mercy a little deeper. How do we learn mercy? The answer really is very simple: just spend time with Jesus! As we get to know Mercy Incarnate better, He will change our inner disposition, our character and our behaviour. A virtuous person is not necessarily merciful; mercy needs to be acquired and learned by Jesus' example.

Jesus used parables to teach us about the inconceivable gift of mercy because they were linked to everyday life. His parables don't need to be interpreted – we just need to live them! When He tells us to become as merciful as His Father, He also indirectly tells us that we should become merciful **because** the Father is merciful beyond our understanding.

It was not good enough for Jesus to just speak about mercy; He made it known to us through real people who either had it or were lacking it. In their lives, we can see ourselves: in our relationship with God, in relationships with each other, in sinners, and so on. We, as we listen or read the parables become drawn into them; they invite us to think about our own lives and our attitudes toward others. This is one of the reasons why Jesus used parables. We may become disarmed but we can be assured that the Truth will set us free!

In many of the parables, we find a three-fold relationship. We can look at the Samaritan, the Levite and the priest; the two debtors and the creditor; the Shepherd, a lost sheep and the other 99 sheep; a father and two sons; a rich man, Lazarus and Abraham; God, an unjust judge and a widow; God, a Pharisee and a tax collector. Mercy functions the best when God, I and someone else are involved. Mercy does not occur in a vacuum and has very little to do with me; it has to do with He, I and the other!

God must be first, for He is Mercy Incarnate. I am second for I want to be an instrument of His mercy, Heaven's extension of mercy, seeing the need and bridging the gap in order to give mercy. Thirdly, there must be someone else to receive the mercy. Because the parables turn everything upside down, this mercy triangle can be turned on any of the three edges. For example, if we put the one who needs mercy first, then we will be inspired to give and God will continue to fill us so that our mercy vessel will never run dry. I become the giver, God is the Bridge and the other receives. We can see how it can bounce back and forth.

Because the Father is merciful, we receive mercy from Him. Then, when we are filled with mercy, we must give it away! We constantly seek those who are most in need. The three-fold relationship of mercy is not only alive in Heaven between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but also here on earth between God, me and others. In the parables it seems that everything is turned inside out and upside down. Contrary to our normal way of thinking, the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in the desert to search out the lost one. He could be taking an enormous risk; upon his return, someone else could have taken possession of his flock. Mercy, my dear friends, does not wait until it is demanded. It is freely given. Mercy has wings, so to speak, and wants to be spread out and spent.

We see this mercy most profoundly in the Parable of the Prodigal Son which has more recently been called the Parable of the Merciful Father. Perhaps we can also see in this parable how Jesus teaches about basic human rights with a Christian perspective. This man with two sons, when his younger son demanded his share of the inheritance, was compelled to divide his goods according to the Jewish law. The first-born was entitled to two-thirds while the younger was to receive the remaining third. There was no discussion here, for the father knew the law and acted accordingly; he also knew that the portion set aside for the older son was safe and sound. According to the law, if the younger son returned, he would have absolutely no right to be treated any better than one of the hired hands. The Jewish law of remuneration was like this: good recompense would be given to the one who did good but there would be no recompense (or perhaps even punishment) for those who did wrong.

So, if we look at this from the perspective of the Jewish law, everything is turned upside down again. A revealing truth comes to the forefront, namely the father's extreme, all-encompassing love. He did not stay in the house while he waited for either son. He didn't verify if the younger son was really repentant. He didn't investigate where the inheritance ended up.

Instead, he threw a party; there was music, dancing, fine food, fine clothing and a ring for his son's finger. In the eyes of the Jewish people, this is upside down justice!

Now, let us have a look at the older son. His father didn't wait for the older son to come into the house; he went out to give his son the news. He didn't ask for his opinion in this matter. He just acted in the most loving way possible. The prodigal son, who asked only to be forgiven and treated like a slave, through the father's abundant mercy, was completely restored to sonship. The older son, enraged by the "royal treatment" of his younger brother, began his list of complaints with "THIS SON OF YOURS", making sure that his father realized that he was distancing himself from his brother. But the father reverses the situation and says "THIS BROTHER OF YOURS was lost but is found". He reminds his older son of the connection that cannot be broken because of jealousy. End of story! Again, in the eyes of the Jewish people, this is upside down justice.

I'd like to take a moment to look at the two sons' major downfall: neither one of them understood the concept of GIVING TO RECEIVE. The younger son received his share of the inheritance, squandered it in the worst possible ways and decided to go back home because he couldn't go anywhere else. He was at the end of his rope. Initially, he didn't seem to be repentant – he was simply driven by hunger.

The older son also had "wrongly wired thinking". He believed that people should get what they deserved; in his brother's case, that was **nothing!** He had always served his father well but hadn't ever been treated to a feast with his friends. In his mind, his father grossly violated the Jewish principle of just rewards. Thus, he drew the line and separated himself from his brother. He was jealous that the prodigal son, through the father's abundant mercy, was completely restored to sonship. The first-born son, looking through the lens of just rewards, couldn't recognize the goodness of his father nor the ties with his own brother.

Some say that mercy is a hard issue to deal with but the truth is that mercy is a HEART issue. That is where mercy comes from. "Dives in Misericordia" means "Rich in Mercy"; "cordia" comes from the Latin for "core of the heart". People's most compassionate decisions are made in the core of the heart – not in the brain. To have compassion and mercy is to have a wide open heart toward the needs of other people. The decision to pour out mercy doesn't happen in our heads but in the core of our hearts. To have real mercy, our hearts must be laid bare. Real mercy does not look within, hearing only "I" but it soars from the very centre of our hearts, embracing and comforting others – most especially those who are in need.

Charity has already talked to you about the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin; let us take a quick look at some of the other parables of mercy in the Gospel according to Luke and see how we can apply them to our own lives. In chapter 10, verses 25-37, we read the parable of the Good Samaritan which shows us how a merciful heart doesn't need to run to and fro to seek out an opportunity to spend mercy. Mercy is needed in our homes, in our streets, in our schools, in our workplaces – mercy is needed always and everywhere. We must listen and be attentive to the call of compassion in our hearts, for our love for God is manifested by showing compassion for our neighbour.

Luke 15: 11-32, as I have mentioned previously, is more about the merciful father than it is about the prodigal son. Just as the father in the parable wanted both of his sons to celebrate with him, our heavenly Father wants all of His children to be reunited to celebrate with Him for all eternity.

In Luke 16: 19-31, we find the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. What is the lesson to be learned here? If we don't give mercy here on earth, we cannot expect mercy from our Father in Heaven. We need to be aware of the needs of our brothers and sisters and be as generous

as we are able. Helping the poor will assure the salvation of both the poor and the rich.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow in Luke 18: 1-8 shows us how perseverance is a necessary part of life; if we persevere in prayer, it can bring about great mercy – it can even change God's mind! His "ordained will" for us switches to His "permissive will" in order to accommodate our free will. His love for us is unfathomable whether we are rich or poor, a widow or an unjust judge. We all have the opportunity to ask for and to receive His mercy.

Luke 18: 9-14 is the parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Here, we see a comparison between the self-righteous Pharisee and the repentant tax collector. Mercy justifies and mercy restores. We know that the contrite heart of a repentant sinner is assured of God's infinite mercy; even the self-righteous Pharisee can receive mercy if he repents rather than exalting himself.

These are just some of the examples of God's mercy at work through the parables. They, of themselves, do not lead us to salvation, but they point out the path which we are being called to follow. Salvation comes from a personal relationship with Jesus, an understanding of His Passion and Resurrection. With these parables, Jesus wants to implicate us, His listeners – He wants you and me to examine ourselves; He wants to touch us and He wants us to be changed. Let us all strive to make this Jubilee Year of Mercy a year to remember!

Just to make sure that we don't only seek mercy in the parables, I would like to point out to you two great Canticles in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. In the Canticum of Mary, also known as the Magnificat, (verses 49 – 52) we read: "The Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is His Name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear Him. He has shown might with His arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones and lifted up the lowly."

In verses 76–79, we find the reference to mercy in the Canticum of Zechariah, also known as the Benedictus: "And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give His people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God by which the daybreak from on high will visit us to shine on those who dwell in darkness and death's shadow, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

My dear brothers and sisters, let us allow ourselves to be guided on that path of peace and mercy!