

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.’

Br Bede Mullens, O.P

‘What a cheek you have, to want to ask for something you are chary about giving!’ That’s what St Caesarius of Arles had to say to those of us who like to think of mercy as one of the cuddlier concepts of Christian faith: we like to tell ourselves about the relief that comes with forgiveness, the understanding of weaknesses, the realisation that we are loved and accepted by God even with all our faults. When people talk about mercy, they usually think of these things – and they aren’t far wrong, because St Paul tells us that Christ died for us while we were sinners still.

But there’s the rub – Christ had to die for us, an agonising, literally excruciating and bloody death; the Holy One had to become accursed for our sakes. Graham Greene speaks memorably of the ‘appalling strangeness of the mercy of God’. Mercy comes at a price: mercy on our sins comes at the price Christ rendered for our sake on the cross. For the original readers or hearers of Matthew’s Gospel, the price-element of mercy (and its practical implications) would perhaps have been more obvious, since the word for ‘merciful’, *eleemon*, recognisably shares a root with the word for ‘almsgiving’, *eleemosyne*. If people did indeed make that connection when listening to the beatitudes, they would be thinking with the mind of St Paul, when he exhorted the Corinthians to give to his collection for the Church in Jerusalem by appeal to the graciousness of the Lord Jesus: ‘though he was rich, he made himself poor for your sake, so that you might be enriched by his poverty’ (2 Cor. 8.9).

Mercy, then, is not just something we receive; it makes a demand on us, from two directions. Looking first to the future, we are told time and again that we cannot expect to receive in time to come what we are not willing to give now. There is something initially illogical about mercy; it revolts the instinct for justice. Justice desires order, including orderly retaliation, but mercy involves the disruption of order: letting go an injustice done to oneself, or giving assistance (financial or otherwise) where it isn’t strictly due. And that disruption of order is always a cause of more or less suffering for the one who shows mercy. But if we don’t take the step to be merciful – to lose face in a feud, to make the effort of an unexpected kindness – the same vicious cycle of strict justice or unrepaired injustice will carry us away in its sweep, and we shall end up not knowing how to receive mercy. Think in this connection of the character of Javert, in *Les Misérables*: his heart is so steeled by the unswerving desire to see justice done that, in the face of genuine mercy, he can only destroy himself – such a world as admits mercy does not to him make sense.

But the second demand is laid upon us from something past: the already-accomplished mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. ‘Christ died for you leaving an example, that you should follow in his steps’, St Peter tells us (1 Pet. 2.21): that is the example of his becoming poor that we might be made rich. He has already broken the iron rule of strict justice, by reaching down from heaven to earth and overcoming all the hard and fast separations of the natural and moral order: for in him not only heaven meets earth, but the immortal puts on mortality, almighty God becomes a man; in him the ruler of all becomes a servant; Israel’s privileges were vouchsafed by the keeping of a strict covenant, whereas in Christ blessings are made to abound freely among all the nations. This is the man in whom history is transformed, the centre-point that gathers into a new orbit sin-scattered humanity. Because of him, mercy really is possible; still more, if we are to belong to him, mercy is imperative.

Past and future meet in the present; their demand is upon us now. You will forgive me the platitude, because in this case it might illuminate something about these demands. So far the picture suggests that Christ has shown mercy to us, we show mercy to other people, and at the end Christ will bestow on us the final mercy of everlasting life. The Gospel, however, suggests that our mercy is never directed away from Christ. Becoming poor, he identifies himself with those to whom we can show mercy – and is that not perhaps the strangest of his mercies? ‘Whatever you did in mercy to the least of my brethren – you did it to me’ (Matt. 25.40).