

Mercy

Helena O'Donoghue

Mercy is often seen as an 'extra', an optional addendum to justice, and not really required for moral conduct. Commonly, it is seen as weak, sentimental, and even a place of peril. To be at the mercy of the elements, or of the ECB or of intruders is not a comfortable place to be. We live in that culture and are tainted by it. While we know that mercy is not a short cut to quick forgiveness, nor an easy escape from accountability, we can often see it as a sharing of surplus resources or a light response to wrongdoing. We think of it as a kind attitude, a particular gift, or a characteristic of a good person or even of the good God. But mercy is more than all these concepts; it is divine size, and is the personal face of the only God we know, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the very 'glory' of God shining on the face of Christ.

The first written articulation of who God is comes to us from our Judean roots. While roaming as a shepherd, Moses is startled by a mysterious bush fire and hears the words: 'I have seen the affliction of my people ... I have heard their cry ... and I mean to deliver them' (Ex3). God's first self-disclosure is that of seer and healer of affliction. Moses seeks further identification and the voice answers: 'I am Who I am ... God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and steadfast love' (Ex34). These are God's credentials – an identity and name by which empathy and action are interwoven into one. No other elaboration like power, perfection or judgement is given. Rather the Hebrew text uses the word '*rachamim*' (literally womb-love) which translates as brimming over with tenderness, compassion, abounding in kindness – in one word, mercy. This is not just the 'feminine' side of God for there is nothing in a womb without a father. God's whole self, whole heart, personally carries the misery – *miser cordia* – of those in slavery, indignity and sin, and makes a safe path to freedom, joy and communal identity. 'I myself will shepherd them and lead them to new pasture. There is no other God than the God who is/am mercy'.

Helena O'Donoghue is a Mercy Sister. Address: Sophia, 25 Cork Street, Dublin 8.

To know this mercy in some way is to be drawn into that space where the ache of God meets the ache of humanity and all creation. It is to stand on holy ground as we sense this dynamic nexus, this communion of aches, the burning bush where God's personal restoring love imbues, sustains and transfers into the weak bush – a template for what happens whenever we encounter the living God.

The Incarnation is the apex and fullness of that intercommunion, an awesome solidarity. Deliverance is not just the removal of pain and sin, it is also the event of birth. The divine ache meets the human ache in the utter smallness of a new-born child whose given name means 'saviour', deliverer. He is to become the shepherd who seeks out the lost, the strayed, the injured, the sick, to heal and bring them back to good pasture. He is the one who draws the sinner, gives rest to the burdened, feeds the hungry and becomes himself the bread of life. The same God who sent Moses on his mission of exodus from slavery, is the One who sends his Son, emptied of his Godhead, to be in on our reality and stand for the weak and oppressed with his very life. This solidarity, this prodigality of com-*passion*, is the very purpose of revelation, the essence of mercy. It is the 'glory of God'.

In the mystery of the Resurrection, the God and Father of Jesus pours forth that Spirit of compassion-love into disciples and apostles in all ages to be the burning bushes of their times, to be witnesses of God's abiding shepherding from generation to generation. 'Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful' Jesus tells us; 'feed my lambs and feed my sheep'. St Laurence O'Toole stands prominently among those disciples. People like him, like Venerable Catherine McAuley, saw it as a special favour of God to be carriers of mercy and defenders of the suffering poor. They, and countless others, were marked by *misericordia* to the core of their beings and their lives bore the watermark of compassion and deliverance.

In his letter announcing the Jubilee year, Pope Francis describes mercy as the 'summary of the Christian faith ... the mystery of the Trinity ... the bridge between God and man', 'the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us' (MV2). These are very large claims and warrant our deep reflection and humble openness to receive. They are reflected in the actions of Pope Francis where he makes the work of compassion – Lampedusa, prisoners, travellers in mourning – take precedence over the defence of doctrine. Cardinal Kasper, whose book on mercy had such influence on him, tells us that 'compassion is the ultimate ethic', and that mercy is the attribute of God which envelopes and infuses all the other divine attributes. Mercy is not a piece of God

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beside other pieces, it is God-size. Meister Eckhart says that we can call God good, we can call God love, but the best name for God is mercy. This is a far-cry from the narrow, wimpy, disparaging notion of mercy which often prevails among us.

What about justice? Mercy includes and subsumes justice because it goes beyond it to healing and restoration, and not just to the re-balancing of the justice scales. Mercy leads us on a journey from repentance, to atonement, and eventually to gratitude and a deep desire for wholeness. No one and no circumstance is beyond the transforming, liberating power of mercy. St John Paul II in his great encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* tells us that God's other name is mercy, and that 'mercy is the very content of our intimacy with God' (DM4). It is in this intimacy that I can authentically know myself as a sinner, as it registers acutely my turning away or avoiding the need of another. This intimacy burns away our selfishness and indifference. This is what we mean by salvation, by the emergence of a kingdom of forgiveness, fraternity and transforming love. God's graciousness then engages us as co-partners and missionaries of mercy, to reflect the shining glory of Jesus.

The cry of Hebrew slaves released the flood of mercy in Moses' time. Today, the cry of the migrant, the persecuted, the abused, the hungry, the homeless and our polluted earth home, call out for deliverance too. The works of mercy are an imperative from which we believers cannot excuse ourselves. Even our smallest efforts become evidence of the 'unstoppable power of the Resurrection Spirit' to quote Pope Francis in Cuba.

For me one powerful expression of mercy is intercession. We know what it is to pray for others, especially for someone who is very close to us. At first we are outside the pain or grief and we pray, get others to pray, we make efforts to get relief. But if we care enough, if we are disturbed enough, our intercession deepens as we try to engage with the pain, take it to ourselves, share it, and from out of our heart rises a passionate entreaty for relief, often taking us into the public domain. To truly intercede we must to some degree enter into, own and live out of the suffering of another. Such intercession, motivated by burning compassion and solidarity, releases not only the desire but the capacity to respond, to innovate, and open up new avenues of intervention towards forgiveness, healing, consolation and hope. It may be slow, it may be hard, it may be frustrating work, but the steadfast love of God urges us not to be despondent. Intercession always relies on the pilgrimage presence of the living God – a cloud by day, a fire by night. It banishes any sense we might have of being merciful out of our own abilities. We are but earthen vessels. In intercession we

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meet the liberating closeness of the God of the Exodus, the death-confounding paschal journey of Jesus, and the fire of the Holy Spirit making us shepherds, missionaries of mercy throughout the world. As the Father sent me, so I send you.

Francis tells us that 'Mercy is the force which reawakens us to new life'. The Extraordinary Jubilee Year, a year of the Lord's favour, is a fresh invitation to explore the height and depth, the length and breadth of God's merciful love for us and all creation. It is a year to reclaim mercy and proclaim the glory of God. The word jubilee comes from the Hebrew word for trumpet – *jobel*. Deliverance from affliction, however small, is a cause of joy, and so with the psalmist we can repeatedly sing 'his mercy endures forever; and the mercies of the Lord are new every day'. Let us give thanks and be servants of God-sized mercy for people and planet today.