

Theological Imaginings: Creating Circles & Culture of Mercy

Victoria Biggs (GB Union): ‘Cultivating Mercy’

Victoria Biggs interviewed by Carmody Grey

Q. So, Vicky, what does mercy in a theological sense?

A. Whenever I think of the word mercy, I think of the Hail Mary as it is sometimes prayed in Hebrew and Arabic. *Blessed is the fruit of your womb*. That word for womb, *rechem* or *raham*, shares the same linguistic root as mercy in both languages. For me this is more than a metaphor. This is a vivid illustration of what mercy actually means in our lives. It’s a womb. It’s something that encloses us, keeps us safe, and more than that, it’s the place where we’re formed. I think we’re often tempted to view mercy in terms of some extremely generous and personally challenging act, such as forgiving the murderer who killed your mother, or something like that. You read these stories in the newspaper and you think, “Oh, that person’s a saint. I couldn’t do that.” In talking like this we render mercy as something almost alien to us, alien to our nature, when really it’s our amniotic fluid. It’s a part of us, and it has been from the beginning.

Q. Thank you. So what does it mean to create a culture of mercy?

A. First of all, we really need to hang on to this sense of mercy as something innate and fundamental to our nature, because only that belief will allow us to do what comes next. I think this is what Julian of Norwich was reaching for in her medieval writings, when she describes Jesus as “our mother from whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we never come.” We’re surrounded by this great mercy. To move from this awareness to creating a culture of mercy, we need to change how we see other people. I find the beatitude on mercy very useful on that. That English translation is really lovely, because it hinges on the verb for sight. It’s not just about mercy as a transaction – “You do something kind for others, others will do something kind for you” – it’s suggesting that if we’re merciful, we’re going to be given this wonderful new vision, this wonderful new way to see people. Another medieval author, the nameless author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, touches on this when he or she writes, “It’s not who you are or who you have been that God sees with his merciful eyes, but

who you would be.” So to create a culture of mercy, we really need to be nurturing that innate capacity to see and believe the best of people, even if that best isn’t yet showing in their actions.

Q. And is this approach meaningful in a secular age?

A. I think that’s a really important question, because I’m aware everything I’ve just said is predicated on my belief in Christ: that Christ surrounds us, Christ is our mother, and that Christ’s nature is mercy. So what does it mean to talk about this in a society where many people don’t share that belief? I would say it has just as much relevance, perhaps even more so. Firstly, for Christians in this society, the presence of differences of opinion doesn’t make it harder to practice mercy. I think it makes it easier, that difference in belief is an invitation rather than an obstacle. I think we see this in a verse that appears in a letter to the Hebrews, which goes, “Let us go to Jesus outside the camp, bearing the sufferings he bore, for here we have no abiding city but we look for the city that is to come.” And for me, to go beyond the camp means to leave behind your certainties – those might be theological, they might be political, they might be something else entirely – in order to have this encounter with people who are perhaps very different from yourself. The result is the creation of this compassionate community, this community that’s distinguished by solidarity and mutual understanding rather than by any kind of partisan loyalty. That to me is intrinsic to mercy. I feel that this is what we mean when we talk of “no abiding city”; we’re creating a different kind of community together through mercy. For the non-Christians in this community – they might not share this belief in Christ, they might not have any theistic belief at all, but one thing everyone has in their history, every single person, is a memory of a time when either they needed mercy and were not shown it, or hopefully a memory of a time when they needed it and received it, and it was a really transformative thing for them. While we might not have shared theological belief, shared faith, we all have shared vulnerabilities and shared pain, and hopefully shared joys as well. And because of these things, there’s never a situation or a time when mercy ceases to be relevant to anyone’s life.