



Be Merciful as Your Heavenly Father Is Mericful

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We are on the eve of an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. In his apostolic letter proclaiming this Jubilee (*Misericordiae Vultus*), Pope Francis invites us all “to gaze more attentively on mercy so that we may become more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives” (§ 3). The Psalmist prays, “remember, O Lord, your mercy and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old” (Ps 25,6). The New Testament vividly portrays how Jesus by his words and deeds reveals the mercy of God. He is the embodiment of divine mercy and he asks his followers to be merciful as his heavenly father is merciful. There is no doubt that mercy is the sum and substance of Christian faith. The second paragraph of the Pope’s letter beautifully summarizes the characteristics of the Christian understanding of mercy: “It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.”

This article offers a brief reflection on some ‘mercy texts’ from the Bible, especially from the gospels.

The Tender Mercy of Our God

The biblical concept of mercy points in two directions: 1. The pardon accorded to one in the wrong; 2. the kindness shown to one in need. The Hebrew words *hesed* (frequently) and *rah^aamim* (less frequently) are normally used to speak about mercy (Greek *eleos*). They convey both these nuances of pardon and kindness.

The OT recounts numerous stories of God’s forgiving mercy for his people. The episode of the golden calf given in Exod 32-34 represents a good example. What the people of Israel committed at the foot of Mount Sinai was an unpardonable sin (Exod 32-33). When they saw Moses delayed to coming down from the mountain, they asked Aaron to make a golden calf for them. They worshipped it and made sacrifices to it shouting, “this is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt”. Their infidelity infuriated God and he wanted to wipe them all out. But when Moses pleaded with him for the people, he relented and changed his mind. Exod 34,6-7 aptly illustrates the features of God’s mercy: “God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping mercy for thousands who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin” (see Deut 5,10; 2 Chr 30,9; Neh 9,17; Pss 86,5.15; 103,8-13; 145,8; Joel 2,13; Jonah 4,2).

Mercy as kindness/compassion shown to one in need is also a recurring motif in the Bible. Ps 103,13 compares the compassion of God with that of a father for his children: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him”. Referring to the tender mercy of God, Isaiah consoles the exiles who were about to return from Babylon, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?

Though she may forget, I will not forget you” (Isa 49,15; see Jer 31,20; Hos 11,1-4; Mal 7,11).

The evangelist Luke begins his story of Jesus, the saviour, presenting Mary (Luke 1,50.54) and Zechariah (1,72.78) praising the ‘mercy of God’ shown to Israel and to the whole of humanity. In 1,50 Mary sings; “His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.” This verse affirms and acknowledges God’s mercy promised to everyone in general (see Exod 20,6; 34,7; Pss 31,19; 85,9; 103,11.17 etc.). The second reference to God’s mercy in her song (1,54) is more particular: “he has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.” Her praise resonates in Ps 98,3: “He has remembered his loving kindness and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (see also

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Isa 63,7-9; Mic 7,20 etc.). Now Mary in her *Magnificat* is praising and thanking God for making this promise of mercy a reality in her life, and for choosing her to be the mother of the one who comes to fulfill this divine promise of mercy.

When Elizabeth gave birth to a son in her old age, her neighbours and relatives received that news as a visible expression of God’s mercy towards her (Luke 1,58). Evidently, it was God’s kindness that opened the womb of a barren woman to be a mother. But what his father Zachariah sings in his *Benedictus* is not about the mercy that he and his wife received from God, but about the mercy promised to all Israel through their fathers (Luke 1,72). God fulfils that promise of mercy now by raising up a ‘horn of salvation’ in the house of David (1,69).

Zechariah qualifies the mercy that they are going to experience through the saviour as the ‘tender mercy of God’ (1,78), mercy that flows from his heart (*splagchnon*).¹ Zechariah’s son is blessed because he will be called the prophet of the most high and he will prepare the way of this tender mercy of God, the Lord. While the *Magnificat* accentuates God’s kindness, especially to the lowly and needy, the *Benedictus* praises his forgiving and redemptive mercy.

The evangelists employ the verb *splagchnizomai* (to have compassion/ to be moved with tender mercy) to represent Jesus’ inner feeling on various occasions. When he saw the harassed and helpless people (Matt 9,36; Mark 6,34), when he saw the hungry multitude (Matt 14,14; 15,32; Mark 8,2), when he saw the crying blind men (Matt 20,34), when he saw the leper (Mark 1,41), when he saw the boy tormented by a dumb spirit (Mark 9,22), when he saw the widow who lost her only son (Luke 7,13) Jesus’ heart moved and springs of compassion flowed from it in the form of healing, feeding and giving life!

The ‘Merciful’ High Priest

Jesus is repeatedly portrayed as the high priest in the letter to the Hebrews (17 times), and this designation appears for the first time in 2,17. “Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful (*eleēmōn*) and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people”. Jesus the high priest is mentioned here with two principal qualities: ‘merciful’ and ‘faithful’. The first refers to his relationship with human persons and the second with God. The subsequent verse says that the mercy and faithfulness of Jesus is rooted on his experience of suffering and temptation, as a result he is able to help those who undergo the same experience (see Heb 2,18). The same idea is repeated in Heb 4,15-16: “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with

confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive **mercy** and find grace to help in time of need.”

People recognized that Jesus could understand their struggles and could empathize with them. That is why those who turned to him for solace and healing asked him to “have mercy” on them (Matt 9,27; 15,22; 17,15; Luke 17,12). The merciful high priest heard their cry for pardon and cry for kindness and he enabled them to experience the infinite mercy of his Father.

I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice

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Twice in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus cites Hos 6,6: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”. The first is in

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the context of Jesus’ eating with tax collectors and sinners after the call of the tax collector Matthew to be his disciple (9,13). Seeing Jesus, a Jew, in such a situation the Pharisees are scandalized. According to their rules of conduct (*Halakoth*) eating with these people would entail dangers of ceremonial defilement. So they ask the disciples about this undesirable behaviour, “why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus’ response was emphatic> He promptly declares God’s point of view, “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” He continues, “Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice”. They need to learn to treat these people as human persons who deserve God’s mercy and not as objects which would cause ritual defilement. To share God’s mercy with the discarded is more pleasing to God than to remain undefiled so as to be able to offer sacrifice.

Jesus quotes Hos 6,6 again in 12,7 to defend his disciples against the attack of the Pharisees. They complain to Jesus against the disciples as they see them plucking grains and eating them (Matt 12,1-2). Jesus justifies the disciples referring to some incidents mentioned in the OT where even people like David and the priests break the law of God when it is necessary (1 Sam 21,3-6); and at the end he adds, “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.” Before condemning others on the basis of laws, one needs to know that what God requires is not legalism but a compassionate understanding of human miseries.

In Matt 23,23, in his third woe to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus mentions three qualities as the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith. These three are interconnected; one cannot have faith in God ignoring justice and mercy. If one is not just and merciful how can one worship God? The prophet Isaiah gives an apt description of true worship as he speaks about true fasting: “is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh” (Isa 58,7).

Be Merciful as Your Heavenly Father Is Merciful

In Matthew, Jesus’ teaching on love for enemies ends with the maxim, “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matt 5,48). What is the perfection of the father that the children are asked to obtain? In 5,45, the father’s unconditional kindness towards everyone – to the evil and the good, to the righteous and the unrighteous – is given as his basic characteristic. From the context we may infer, that it is into this kindness of the Father, his perfection, that the children are asked to grow. The evangelist Luke (6,36) makes it obvious by using the word ‘merciful’ (*oiktirmon*) instead of Matthew’s ‘perfect’ (*teleios*): “be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful”.

Who are the merciful? In the LXX the term ‘merciful’ (*ho eleēmōn*) occurs 28 times and 24 times it is used to speak about God’s mercifulness (Exod 22,26; 34,6; Pss 85,15; 102,8 etc). Some of these texts praise God both as ‘gracious’ (*ho oiktirmōn*) and ‘merciful’ (2 Chr 30,9; Neh 9,17,31; Pss 110,4; 111,4; Joel 2,13). The prophet Jonah’s complaint against God reveals God’s compassionate nature: “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4,2). The New Testament uses both the words *ho eleēmōn* and *ho oiktirmōn* to mention the ‘merciful. Being merciful is a divine characteristic. ‘The merciful’ are the ones who radiate this divine nature through their lives. It is about them Jesus says in the beatitude “blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matt 5,7).

Jesus in Luke, after exhorting the disciples to be merciful as their heavenly Father is merciful, gives two concrete proposals for the children to practise: “And do not judge and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (Luke 6,37-38). This teaching clearly indicates how mercy will be shown to the merciful.

Should You Not Have Had Mercy on Your Fellow Servant, as I Had Mercy on You?

God’s uncompromising stance regarding mercy is powerfully demonstrated in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew (18,23-35). In this parable (18,23-35), the servant is accused by his master for not forgiving the comparatively

insignificant debt of his fellow worker. Mercy and forgiveness are treated synonymously in this parable. God has shown tremendous mercy towards human beings by forgiving their shortcomings. He demands the same from them: to show mercy towards their fellow human beings by forgiving their weaknesses (see 18,34-35; 6,12.14-15). The master hands that wicked servant over to the jailers (torturers?) until he can pay his entire debt. Concluding the parable Jesus warns, “So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (18,35). The relationship between human beings is the criterion for the relationship between God and human beings. If one can’t show mercy to his/her brother/sister one cannot maintain a healthy relationship with God.

The One Who Showed Mercy on Him

Once a lawyer came to Jesus and asked him, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10,25). The evangelist says that the lawyer wanted to test Jesus, that is why he asked such a question. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all with your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself”, a combination of Deut 6,5 and Lev 19,18. Both the lawyer and Jesus had no doubt about these precepts of the law as the basic condition for inheriting eternal life. But the query of the lawyer did not end there, he wanted to know who his neighbour was; and the evangelist adds that his question was to justify himself. What did he want to justify? Most probably, the lawyer might have held the view that any fellow Israelite would be his neighbour - a view that defined the neighbour based on their religio-ethnic identity. In fact, this was the view that is reflected even in Lev 19,18.² So the lawyer might have been trying to tell Jesus, that he was a man who loved his neighbour. But Jesus challenges his view of his neighbour and his justified conscience telling him the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10,30-37).

Evidently, what made the Samaritan the hero of the story is his **mercy** shown to a person in need. He never bothered whether that wounded man belonged to his ethnic/religious group or not. Perhaps, what prevented the priest and the Levite from helping this injured one, even though he was a Jew, was their concern for ritual purity. Here Jesus does not quote Hosea and say that he desires mercy and not sacrifice, but he makes the lawyer accept that the Samaritan who showed mercy to him was his true neighbour. The dialogue between them ends with Jesus advising the lawyer, “go and do likewise”.

The final words of Jesus to the lawyer are given not only to him, but also to every one who seeks to love God with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, with all one’s strength and all one’s mind. “Go and do likewise”, these words reveal the secret for inheriting eternal life. Moreover, they spell out the basic requirement for being a follower of Jesus. There are two imperatives (‘go’, ‘do’) and a modifier (‘likewise’) in this demand. We may supply the modifier to both the words separately. So we read, ‘go likewise’ and ‘do likewise’. Yes to be a true believer, to be a true follower of Jesus one has to ‘go like’ the Samaritan. He went beyond all the religious, cultural and ethnic prejudices and preoccupations. When he saw a man in such a situation, concerns about his ritual purity, or thoughts of enmity between Jews and Samaritans did not bother him much, rather he was moved with compassion (*splagchnizomai*) - the same feeling that Jesus experienced when he met people in similar conditions.

The Samaritan did not ask the man any question about his whereabouts or about his profession. But he went to him and bandaged his wounds with oil and wine, the things that he had taken along for his journey. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. Since he put the man on the donkey, he might have walked the whole way to

the inn. But ignoring the fatigue of the journey he nursed the man through the whole night. That was not everything all. On the following day as he had to continue his journey, he entrusted the man to the care of the innkeeper. Even there, he did not ask for the charity of the innkeeper, rather he advanced money for the expenses and promised him that he would come back and pay the rest. Why did the Samaritan do all this? Just because he was moved by compassion. He was merciful just as his heavenly father is merciful!

I would like to conclude this brief reflection on mercy quoting Pope Francis again. “God’s mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones (cf. Ez 37,1-14). ... Let us be renewed by God’s mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of his mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish” (from his first Easter *Urbi et Orbi* message, on March 31, 2013). 🌱

¹ The Greek word used here for ‘tender’ is *splagchnon*. The literal meaning of *splagchnon* is ‘bowels’ which was considered by the Hebrews as the seat of kindness, affection, compassion etc. In English the use of the word ‘heart’ as seat of affection comes closer to it.

² See the injunction in Lev 19,18a that leads to this commandment: “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the *sons of your people*, but love *your neighbour* as yourself” The phrase “sons of your people” parallels “your neighbour” in the second part.