

Along the track

Justice or Mercy?

Year of Mercy III

Pope John XXIII wrote in the biography of his spiritual journey that mercy is the most beautiful attribute of God. Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical (*God is Love*) that mercy is in reality the core of the Gospel message; it is the name of God Himself and now, Pope Francis calls us to a Jubilee Year of Mercy.

So is there such a thing as God's justice? Yes, there is but it is not always as we would imagine. Sometimes when we are confronted by dreadful injustice, suffering and callous treatment of helpless victims, we all feel 'someone must pay'. Surely God will get them in the end. We can be faced with situations that we think are just not fair – surely God can't sit by and allow this to happen!

Perhaps the greatest example of God's justice in action is the resurrection. Wasn't this a great opportunity to exact some retribution, to make someone pay for this terrible torture and execution of His Son? But it doesn't happen – in fact Jesus prays: 'Father forgive them'. And God does!

God's justice does not necessarily accord with our way of seeing things. God does not always 'play' by our rules, our ways are not necessarily God's ways. God does not always judge as we do or as we think God should, because God is love, God is mercy.

Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers (Mt 20 1-16) tells the story of a very rich and generous landowner who hires workers to work in his vineyard, some early in the morning, promising them a good wage. He keeps hiring others as the day progresses, each new group having to work fewer hours than the group before them. The last group hired works for just one hour. Then he tells his foreman to pay everyone a full day's wage. The workers who toiled the whole day complain 'This isn't fair! We worked the whole day and bore the heat of the sun and this last group worked just one hour. It's unfair that we all receive the same wage!' The generous landowner, obviously representing God, responds: 'Friend, didn't you agree to this wage? And isn't a good wage? Are you envious and angry because I'm generous?'

Generosity is at the very heart of God's justice. Just think of the woman about to be stoned for adultery. 'Where are your accusers?' Jesus asks her. 'Did no one stay to condemn you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.' (Jn 8:11).

Matthew describes God's justice in very graphic terms (Mt 25: 31-46) – the Final Judgment, when God will separate the sheep from the goats and God's justice will be meted out. But to whom? The measure of our lives is seen in our generosity to the poor, the lonely, the sick, the imprisoned, in how we have reached out to others. God is love and, unless we too can love, unless we too have that attitude, that vision, perhaps we are not able to see or appreciate God? Are we condemning ourselves?

Justice or mercy are not about simply letting someone off the hook and not punishing them as severely as they deserve. Being just is much, much harder than that. Jesus told us that if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also! That's hard to do. Both mercy and justice are best understood as an outward manifestation of God's love in the world. Mercy and justice come from the realisation that we are loved by God, that we have been gifted with God's love and God's mercy. It is also a realisation that we all need that mercy. We all need forgiveness. None of us is perfect, none of us can claim to be without sin. We can only understand something of God's justice or be genuinely merciful when we realise our own weakness, our own frailty and God's generosity to us. Then we can be sympathetic enough to those who are struggling with their frailty and weakness. In a very real sense, it is the measure of the God-life within us.

We can become very judgmental not only about how others should or should not act but also about how God should or should not act. Do not judge, Jesus says, if you do you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you (Mt 7:1). Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive. If we are to show mercy, to offer forgiveness, pardon and compassion we have to open ourselves to the grace of God. We can't forgive and forget without this help, nor turn the other cheek.

If we ourselves are open each day to admitting our need for the mercy of God welcoming our fragile and imperfect selves, we will have the love and mercy to forgive others who may have hurt us by their shortcomings and failures. When we admit our own shortcomings and failures, when we pray to be able to forgive, to offer understanding, hope and pardon, God can act through us. We might even stop judging others or telling God how God should be judging them!

This powerful prayer was found at a concentration camp at the end of World War II:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill,
But all those of ill will.
But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us;
Remember the fruits we have bought thanks to this suffering –
Our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility,
Our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart
Which has grown out of all this;
And when they come to judgment,
Let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness. Amen.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au