



Homily for 9/15/2019

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C

Rev. J. David Carter, JCL

Inconceivable Mercy

In the movie, “The Princess Bride”, a cult classic film if there ever was one, one of the antagonists in the movie, a Sicilian named Vizzini, in a particular scene, repeated the word, ‘Inconceivable!’ as his exclamation of choice. However, he used the word so often and in ways that didn’t make sense that another one of the characters, Inigo Montoya, remarked, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

The same can be said about the word “mercy” in today’s common parlance. We throw it around to mean things like tolerance, accommodation of error, non-judgmentalism. Mercy has come to connote, in the minds of many, a simple acceptance of evil without any need for change on the part of the evildoer. There is talk of a so-called “merciful church” that accepts people where they are but never tells them that sin is sin or requires any conversion or moving away from sinful habits or actions. However, those understandings are far from the Scriptural and doctrinal meaning we hold as Catholic Christians. For sure, the Church stands as the refuge for sinners, but it is a refuge in as much as it provides a remedy for our sinful state. The gate to this refuge is repentance – that is, to stop calling sin good, and declare you need God’s mercy!.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the word for mercy is “*Hesed*,” which has lots of connotations, such as love, kindness, compassion, and, of course, mercy. It occurs 248 times in the Old Testament. In fact, in the Responsorial Psalm today, it appears three times in the first line of the first strophe and is translated three different ways! “**Have mercy** on me, O God, in your **goodness**; in the greatness of your **compassion** wipe out my offense.” Mercy, goodness, compassion all used to translate ‘*Hesed*’ in the Hebrew.

The Latin word that is used most often to translate it is *miser cordia* - heart sorrow, or pity.

The same Psalm in Latin: *Miserere mei Deus secundum magnam misericordiam tuam et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum dele iniquitatem meam.*

The word for mercy, or its corollary concept, is used some 93 times in the New Testament. Usually it is Jesus “having compassion on someone” or else someone is crying out to Jesus to show them mercy, like the Blind Bartimaeus.

The Greek verb is *Eleo* - to have mercy, and at Mass we say, “Kyrie, Eleison,” meaning, “Lord, have Mercy”. Mercy is central to our Christian worship. We stand before the Almighty as sinners, as those worthy of death because of our sins. Our worship is a plea to the God who created us not to condemn us because of our sins, but to save us in the name of His Son, who came into this world to save sinners. “Lord, relent!” “Lord, do not punish us according to our crimes!” “For the sake of his sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world!” To enter into true Christian worship is to plead guilty towards the judge who has power to indict or set free. Guilty as charged. Please, Lord, give me a lighter sentence than what I deserve! Kyrie, Eleison!

But nowhere in the definition of this word, mercy, is the concept that anything is owed. The guilty have no rights to leniency. Mercy is due to no one. Mercy cannot be the object of presumption. It is a matter of compassion but not of compulsion. Furthermore, those who plead innocent cannot receive mercy; their pride in their innocence prevents it. Those who maintain that they are, in fact, not lost, cannot therefore allow themselves to be found. It’s inconceivable. Only sinners can say, “Kyrie, Eleison.” And only sinners can receive it. The self-righteous cannot.



In the Gospel today, we hear three stories about God's mercy towards those who were lost. But note the utter gratuitousness of the protagonists in each of the stories. The shepherd, the woman of the house, and the father were not compelled by duty to do the things they did. In fact, it is surprising that they acted the way they did, like finding one lost sheep when it means leaving 99 behind; or spending time to look for one lost coin and then spending more money to throw a party; or throwing an even bigger party for a profligate son who returns home. In fact, when Jesus tells us these stories, they appear to almost be absurd. It seems as if the shepherd is derelict in his duty to the other 99, that the woman has utterly lost her mind and is wasting her time, and that the father has been unfair to his older son.

But remember the context of to whom Jesus was telling these stories. Sinners were coming to hear him speak: the guilty, for sure. They didn't even hide their guilt; they were so blatantly guilty that they couldn't pretend not to be. But they came because he was talking about a way for them to be healed from their obvious sins, while the self-righteous, that is, those who thought they were sinless, scoffed and complained. Jesus addresses these parables of God's absurd mercy to the self-righteous. But there is an important point made even to the sinners who are listening. The two parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin both conclude with the very important detail that there will be rejoicing over the sinner who repents. Thus, the mercy shown in the parable is intricately linked to repentance. This is repeated also in the son, who repents, which literally means 'rethink'. He rethinks his situation among the swine and returns to the father's house. And the father shows him compassion, pity, heart sorrow, mercy. Mercy is only available to those who recognize their sinfulness before the Lord and repent.

The Good News is that the Father is always waiting, the Shepherd is always on the lookout, the Homemaker is always wanting to account for every coin entrusted to her. Such is God for the soul He created!

But if the son never returns, if the coin is spent carelessly, if the sheep actively fights and avoids the Shepherd - in a word, if there is no repentance - what is God to do? God has given us free will. He does not go back on that gift. Yes, God is merciful. But he waits for us. And God's patience is ordered to our salvation (Cf 2nd Peter 3:15) but he does not impose His mercy on us. It has to be petitioned through repentance.

It is one thing to throw yourself on Divine Mercy in desperate times. It is another to simply take God's forgiveness for granted, act presumptuously, or even deny one's sins. Beware the pride that precedes a fall. Yes, there is room in God's kingdom for every sinner, no matter how low, provided he repent. The proud will not stand before the Lord.

God's love and mercy towards us sinners is so inconceivable that Jesus has to use absurd parables to describe it. However, to receive it, we have to be willing to be the sheep who submits, the coin to be found, the son to return. In a word, there is no mercy without repentance. Turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel.