



Christian Perspectives on Mercy

Tuesday, March 8, 2016 | Scarboro Missions

Presenter: Murray Watson, M.Div. SSL, Ph.D. (Trinity College, Dublin)

- Mercy: often *not* the first quality many people associate with contemporary Christianity!
- Pope Francis, in his letter *Misericordiae Vultus* [The Face of Mercy], announcing the “Jubilee Year of Mercy” from December 2015 to November 2016:

“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love ... Wherever the Church is present, the mercy of [God] the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, **wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.**”
- Mercy: a virtue about which Jews, Christians and Muslims share a great deal in common—and yet one that Pope Francis believes our society is in danger of *forgetting*
- Tonight, we will explore three major “pillars” which contribute to the Christian understanding of what mercy means, and what it looks like
- **ONE:** the concept of mercy in Judaism, and especially in the Hebrew Scriptures (=Old Testament): “... for God’s mercy endures forever”

“Mercy”: translating two very important Hebrew terms: *hesed* and *rahamim*
Hesed: the unshakeable love, kindness and faithfulness of God, rooted in His covenant relationship with the Jewish people and their descendants
Rahamim: rooted in the Hebrew word *rehem*, a mother’s womb, it connotes that bond of tenderness, compassion, devotion and infinite generosity that ideally links a mother to her child
Far from the stereotype of the Old Testament God as a God of wrath, violence and judgement, some of the most tender and significant descriptions of God’s *mercy* come to us from the Old Testament
- **TWO:** the person of Jesus Himself—His words and His example, as they have been passed down to us in the Gospels
Two main clusters of Greek words: those connected with the noun *eleos*, and with the verb *eleēō*, meaning “mercy” and “to show mercy”; and those connected with the verb *oiktirō*, “to be compassionate”.
Kyrie eleison [Greek Κύριε ἐλέησόν]: “Lord, have mercy” (from the traditional Catholic Mass)
Matthew 23:23: Jesus reminds his audience that the “weightier matters of the Law” are justice, faithfulness—and *mercy*
The Beatitudes: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will have mercy shown to them” (note the reciprocal relationship of *our* mercy and that of God!)
Three key “mercy” parables of Jesus: The Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and the Last Judgement
- **THREE:** Christians of the past who have lived out mercy in exemplary ways that continue to inspire Christians today. For example:
St. Lawrence the Deacon (Rome, mid-3rd century): “*Here* are the riches of the Church”
Dorothy Day (USA, 20th century): “No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless; there’s too much work to do!”
Trappist Father Christian de Chergé (Algeria, 20th century): “Tell him that I forgive him ... and may we find each other in heaven.”
- “I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with [Judaism and Islam], and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination!” (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, #23)

Franciscus