

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

MERCY

Year C – All Saints’ Day – Luke 6: 20-31

Blessings and Woes

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

*‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

²¹ *‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*‘Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

²² *‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you^[a] on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*

²⁴ *‘But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

²⁵ *‘Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*‘Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

²⁶ *‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

Love for Enemies

²⁷ *‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

Jesus’ teaching on loving our enemies may leave us thinking... isn’t this just ‘mission impossible’? Where do we even start?

In a commentary entitled ‘The Law of Love’ G. B. Caird explains, helpfully:

*‘Jesus did not tell his disciples to fall in love with their enemies or to feel for them as they felt for their families and friends. **Agape** is a gracious, determined, and active interest in the true welfare of others, which is not deterred even by hatred, cursing, not limited by calculation of desserts or results, based solely on the nature of God. Love does not retaliate (vv. 27-31), seeks no reward (vv. 32-36), is not censorious (vv. 37-38)’¹*

¹ G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St Luke* (London, Adam & Charles Black, 1963)

There we have the heart of it...*'based solely on the nature of God.'*

That's where we start, Jesus says, because God is mercy through and through. A few verses later he spells it out:

³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful'.

Jesus tells us God's mercy is unstinting; it is for everyone. And so the seemingly simple command *'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful'* demands of us a generosity of heart that doesn't just perform acts of mercy, but *becomes* merciful – merciful like God.

This does sound like 'mission impossible' doesn't it? How can we *become* merciful? The sayings of the early church mothers and fathers can help us. Here is one from Abba Macarius, for example. Asked by a young monk for a word of salvation, Abba Macarius tells him to *"Go to the cemetery and abuse the dead."* The brother did so, returning to report that the dead had made no reply. *"Go and praise them instead,"* the old man instructed. Again there was silence. Then Macarius said: *"You see how you insulted them and they did not reply, and how you praised them and they did not speak; so you too, if you wish to be saved, must become like the dead - taking no account of either the scorn of men or their praises."*²

Abba Macarius' rather strange instruction teaches an important truth: that mercy flows from a heart that is as impervious to scorn as it is to praise; a heart that is free from the burden of judging others, because we leave this to God. This means we have to let go of something else: the need to control. Commenting on unmerciful servant (Matt 18: 23-25), Rowan Williams writes:

*"He has failed to grasp that his master has, paradoxically, paid him the debt of grace...The fact that he has been shown mercy is not a privilege that enables him to live without cost but a gift that enables him to create justice in his turn. Mercy - letting go of the power we long for, letting go of the need for control, the need to be always the one who has the freedom to define others, always the one to whom something is owed, always the one who is the object of admiration for their generosity - is what stands over against avarice. Jesus tells his disciples that 'the kings of the gentile's exercise authority over them and their great men are called benefactors': a sharp and characteristic piece of irony. Here are all these potentates in the Roman political world of the day, dealing out life and death with a broad hand so that everyone is constantly reminded that they are controlled by a power they cannot challenge or hold to account - and they are adored and admired for it. Not so for you, says Jesus to his friends. And he himself demonstrates, again and again, how all of this language of indebtedness, and the tangled webs of status, power and different difference associated with it, are irrelevant to the life of the Kingdom. Blessed are the merciful; Mercy will be shown to them"*³

Williams here frames mercy as *renunciation*. The unmerciful servant demands repayment because he does not understand that mercy is pure generosity – a gift which invites, demands even, that he be merciful too.

Of course, when Jesus says: *'If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also'* he is not telling us to invite aggression. He is inviting us to *free* ourselves from the curse of aggression - from the

2 The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, ed. Benedicta Ward (Collegeville, Michigan, Liturgical Press, 1975)

3 Rowan Williams, Passions of the Soul (London, Bloomsbury, 2024)

urge to retaliate, recover our dented pride, protect our egos. Mercy here means that we are looking at someone as God sees them, with infinite compassion, despite their sins.

Tom Wright describes well how extravagant this generosity is:

“The Kingdom that Jesus preached and lived was all about her glorious, uproarious, absurd generosity... Jesus’s point was not to provide his followers with a new rule book... The point was to inculcate an attitude of heart, a lightness of spirit in the face of all that the world can throw at you. And at the centre of it is the thing that motivates and gives colour to the whole: you ought to be like this because that’s what God is like. God is generous to all people, generous, in the eyes of the stingy, to a fault: he provides good things for all to enjoy, the undeserving as well as the deserving. He is astonishingly merciful; anyone who knows their own heart truly, and still goes on experiencing God’s grace and love, will agree with this. How can we, his forgiven children, be any less?”⁴

The Gospel, Wright tells us, does not call us to a reasonable moderation of kindness; it calls us to imitate the extravagant heart of God.

Wright continues:

“If you lived in a society where everyone believed in this God, there wouldn’t be any violence. There wouldn’t be any revenge... Property and possessions wouldn’t be nearly as important as making sure your neighbour was all right... Life would be exuberant, different, astonishing.”

This is the Kingdom R.S. Thomas describes, where *‘There are quite different things going on’*⁵. Mercy in God’s Kingdom is radically different. So, when Jesus tells us *“do to others as you would have them do to you”* he is not giving us an ethical code of conduct, he is inviting us to participate in the life of God. We give because God gives, we forgive because God forgives, we bless because God blesses.

Like Thomas, G.B Caird describes what’s going on in the Kingdom as utterly different: as *‘a complete reversal of the world’s values’* – a world dominated by mercy rather than power:

“The first characteristic of the new life is a complete reversal of the world’s values... The men who were bidden to love their enemies were living in enemy-occupied territory, where resentment was natural and provocation frequent... They were not just to submit to aggression but to rob it of its sting by voluntarily going beyond its demands. To those who believe in standing up for their individual or national rights this teaching has always seemed idealistic, if not actually immoral. Those who are concerned with the victory of the Kingdom of God over the Kingdom of Satan can see that it is the only realism. He who retaliates thinks that he is manfully resisting aggression; in fact he is making an unconditional surrender to evil... Evil propagates by contagion. It can be contained and defeated only when hatred, insult and injury are absorbed and neutralised by love.”⁶

Caird here reminds us that mercy is the only way to grow the Kingdom. It may seem to us utterly unrealistic to *‘turn the other cheek’* but in fact, Caird explains, it is the only way to break the cycle of evil. Evil has to be *‘absorbed and neutralised by love’*. Only mercy can halt the spread of evil.

Caird goes on to remind us of our identity:

4 Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London, SPCK, 2001)

5 Carys Walsh, *Frequencies of God: Walking through Advent with R.S Thomas* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2020)

6 G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St Luke* (London, Adam & Charles Black, 1963)

“Duty obeys the rules, but love grasps opportunities.... Duty expects to be recompensed or at least recognised; love expects nothing in return. To love like that is to be sons of the Most High; for likeness is proof of parentage.”⁷

We are not asked to deny the existence of evil - Jesus said that evil will be excluded from the Kingdom, but that's not our concern (Matt 13:47-52) - we are asked to deny evil's grip on us and *become* merciful and live as children of God.

Tom Wright sums this up well: *“How can we, his forgiven children, be any less?”*⁸

We give because God gives, we forgive because God forgives, we bless because God blesses.

⁷ ibid

⁸ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London, SPCK, 2001)