

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

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The Beatitudes

6: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy

This beatitude in Matthew's 'Sermon on the Mount' is not directly mirrored in Luke, but almost immediately after Luke's shorter version of the beatitudes we find "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful", which is almost the same.

We all know what 'mercy' is - it is a loving, compassionate, forgiving disposition towards those who suffer distress. Pope Francis says "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life". Mercy in the bible has both a general and a specific meaning. The general meaning is love and kindness; the specific focusses on mercy as forgiveness. But we must then ask a number of questions: "To whom should we be merciful? From whom shall we obtain mercy if we ourselves are merciful? and "When shall we obtain that mercy?"

To whom should we be merciful? The Lord's prayer gives us a direct answer. That familiar sentence which we shall shortly say as part of our Compline service "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive them that trespass against us*" and we ask for forgiveness from our Father in heaven; almost exactly the same as the beatitude. We therefore have an answer to two of my questions. We must be merciful to others who do us wrong; and our Father will forgive us.

But surely it is not only to those who have "trespassed against us" that we should show mercy. Bishop Stephen writes that the Church is called to be a community of mercy. When people meet us, love and mercy should be the first qualities they encounter - we should be a mirror of the body of Christ. In his ministry Jesus was gentle and full of mercy. You'll remember that Jesus had particularly harsh words for an unmerciful servant who was forgiven a debt by his master but did not forgive the debt of his fellow servant.

Some evolutionary biologists would argue that humans are not naturally forgiving; that our evolutionary priority is to dominate so that we pass on our genes. But this argument neglects the fact that we humans are a very social animal. We should therefore be forgiving to everyone with whom we come into contact; and on occasion that can be difficult! However, love, compassion, and forgiveness towards family members, neighbours, church or work colleagues are very important for harmonious relationships in our various social groups.

But it is not just our immediate group; we need to be merciful to a much wider group than our immediate contacts. Jesus reminds us that whatever "you did to the least of my brethren, you did it to me". This follows on from what we were thinking about last Sunday - our much wider responsibility in our globally connected world. We are commanded to what are called "the bodily works of mercy": to feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; and visit the imprisoned and sick. A tall order; and there is also the "spiritual works of mercy" which include spreading the news about God's love; comforting the sorrowful; and praying for all those in need.

If we do that we are called blessed because we place showing mercy above our own rights; we care for people in need, and try to heal wounds.

We must also be merciful to **ourselves**. If we are meek, poor in spirit (the earlier beatitudes) then we know that we are not self-sufficient, that we shall make errors; we will know our own inadequacies and dependence. Shortly in the compline prayers we shall say “make us so to abound in sorrow for our sins, which were the cause of thy passion”. But, unless we are confident of God’s mercy to us we can beat ourselves up and this can lead to all sorts of problems. And sometimes it can be particularly hard for us to forgive *ourselves* for something we know we have done wrong! Psychologists tell us that it is important to be merciful to ourselves before we can be merciful to others. Indeed, there’s a real positive feedback in it. The more we understand the grace of God in our own lives (which will come from the experience of confession of sin and thanksgiving for forgiveness -- two things that often get neglected) the more we shall be able to be merciful to others.

From whom shall we obtain mercy? The obvious answer is from our Father in heaven and therefore effectively from our Lord himself. But also in a very practical way, we are much more likely to be forgiven by others to whom we have wittingly or unwittingly done wrong if we ourselves are known to be forgiving. And, as we have just seen, we may even be more merciful to ourselves - mercy is contagious!

When shall we obtain mercy? Perhaps the first answer to this part of the question that comes to mind is the divine mercy in the final judgement, when all our pretensions are stripped away and in the words of Paul “we shall know, even as we are known”. Our Lord promises that we can be confident that we shall receive mercy, not because we have accumulated enough good deeds, but because we have understood mercy in all its forms during our own spiritual pilgrimage and were eager to share it with others, knowing that we ourselves have been forgiven, day by day. So it is not just at that last judgement when “The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised”. Indeed, time cannot have the same meaning in eternity. God’s love for us and his mercy is a constant present every day of our lives. Indeed, we are truly blessed when we understand that.