

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, GUILDFORD

29th FEBRUARY 2004

Justice and Mercy

I am not ashamed to admit that I cried in the theatre this week. The play was 'The Merchant of Venice', the acting was good, but it was quite simply the words, Shakespeare's sentiments that moved me to tears. It was perhaps not surprisingly the familiar and famous words of Portia that did it: having acknowledge that Shylock is right, that justice is on his side, nevertheless she urges him towards mercy.

'The quality of mercy is not strained,
it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.
It is twice blessed. It blesseth him that give and him that takes'.

And she goes on to say that of course Kings are, or at least ought to be, just; of course justice is crucial, but mercy is 'above this sceptred sway. It is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute of God himself.' And then

'earthly power is most like God's when mercy seasons justice.'

It is an age-old problem – how to uphold justice and yet be merciful; how to protect what is right and good (which is so much more than what is merely legal), and also to season it with mercy. I am quite sure you need no persuading of the two ideals of justice and mercy, but - *how* to hold those together! And ironies abound.

In Islam one of the names for God, Allah, is 'the merciful one' and yet that religion is seen by many in the West to be fiercely judgmental, to be severe in its punishment. But is not easy for Christians either who for so long have split those two ideals between the two Testaments: the Old Testament speaking about a God of Justice, and the New Testament about the God of Mercy. It was a man called Marcion in the 2nd Century AD who so clearly saw the need for a split that he urged the church to let go of the Old Testament (apart from a few nice Psalms and a few passages from Isaiah). Yet he was one of the first people that the church ex-communicated and branded as a heretic. Somehow justice and mercy have to be held together.

Luther, 1000 years later, desperate to be released from the oppression of a rule-bound, legalistic church which seemed to be promoting a rule-bound, legalistic God, found new freedom as he re-read and reinterpreted Paul's letter to the Romans and found he could believe in a God of grace and mercy. That personal experience of Luther Calvin took up. Calvin, a great thinker, turned this into a spiritual tradition. He saw Luther as too conservative and wanted to go even further in making sure the church believed in a God of mercy and grace. But as he wrote his numerous books ironically more and more Calvin drew on the Old Testament, and not just the Old Testament, but the rules within

the Old Testament. And so the dourness of Calvinistic churches – no dancing, no decoration, no music, seemingly no enjoyment! They became a church of judgement, and that tradition finds its way in the 18th Century in Massachusetts to the Salem Witch-hunts and burning the few free spirits.

But the mixed inheritance is even with us today. In the last year or so the voices heard most condemning the sins of others, seem harsh, legalistic, and I want to say, seem Old Testament. The language of grace, of mercy, of kindness, seems muted.

But what about you? Let's not kid ourselves that there is any easy solution to this, which is why I've mentioned all that 2000 years of history. Do you enter Lent feeling that this, above all, is to be a season of justice, or of mercy? Of course being Anglicans we probably want to say 'Yes it's both', but *HOW* can it be both? I am going to suggest one word to you – RULE.

Immediately you might think that's on the brink of affirming the legal side. We keep rules or we break them; and if we break them, we are punished. But I am taking the word 'rule' in the older sense, the sense of a rule or a ruler. Not a Queen Elizabeth sort of ruler but a 12" or a 36" rule. For one of the original meanings of that word is expressed thus: 'this rule is something against which you can be measured'. A rule is a proper measure of cloth, a proper measure of what is expected of us, of human behaviour. And so one of the fundamental New Testament meanings of the word 'sin' is to miss the mark or fall short of the rule. X, Y and Z is what God expects of us. That should be the measure of our behaviour, and yet if we sin we fall short. One of the first texts that I was ever told to learn comes from Romans 3 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'. Don't despair yet if you think that again this is already trying to emphasis the judgmental aspect of our faith. *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God* is not condemning, it is simply describing. This is how we are. The glory of God is THAT big and is wonderful, and we, at our best, are *that* big. That is simply how we are. Paul is saying this: all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that is his spring board to say 'nevertheless God accepts us, and God tries to draw us from being *that* to being THAT'. So that rule, the measure by which God wishes us to live our lives is already a subtle way of trying, not to judge, but to hold together. High standards are affirmed without condemning - but mercifully releasing us into becoming more than we already are.

A quote from Oscar Wilde, whom I think at a very deep level knew the structure of the New Testament story of grace: 'we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars'. So what is unacceptable to God and to ourselves is to lie face-down in the gutter. The season of Lent is a season to combine star-gazing and knowing that we're not there yet.

But there is another thing about the word 'rule', in its meaning of 'a measure'. Such and such is what is expected - sometimes we fall short, or *sometimes* we exceed, *sometimes* we go too far. The Merchant of Venice is a study in obsession. Shylock with his drive and desire for justice goes too far, obsessively, and that is his downfall. Antonio who is introduced to us in scene 1 as a man of sadness and melancholy, goes too far with that,

which turns into hatred. So he needs someone to hate. He is also generous but then goes too far in that by being reckless in giving away his livelihood and his life, and that is nearly his downfall. Sometimes with rules we simply are driven too far.

I was reading the Rule of Benedict the other day which was Benedict's way of simply trying to describe what is good behaviour for a group of monks. Chapter 64 talks about what an Abbot should be like. 'He must hate faults but love the brothers, and when he must punish them he must observe prudence and avoid extremes, otherwise *by rubbing too hard to remove the rust he may break the vessel.*' So I ask you to pause, even though we are only three days into Lent, just pause and look at your Lenten discipline: check to see whether you are likely to 'rub too hard and so break the vessel'. The Rule of Benedict is famous for its sense of balance: not balancing opposites (because I am saying justice and mercy must go together), but about a balance of having a right judgement – realistic, what is expected of us and what we can hope for. For the strong, challenge; for the weak, encouragement; for the lazy, to be spurred on; for the enthusiastic, a little bit of gentleness. And in the end, Benedict says, 'Never, never despair of the mercy of God'.

Amen.