

Merciful like Abba, Our Father

7th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 24 February 2019

Readings: 1 Sam 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; 1 Cor 15:45-49; Lk 6:27-38

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Ex 21:24) is the accepted norm of justice of the First Testament. It is a principle of retaliation and an example of ‘cold justice’, which was the order of the day. Seen against this background, the mercy and magnanimity of David is truly extraordinary and exemplary. Saul—though anointed by Prophet Samuel as the first king of Israel—is totally unworthy and destined to lose his throne to David, an ordinary shepherd. Blinded by anger, jealousy and hatred, Saul sets out to eliminate his rival, David, armed with a big battalion of some 3,000 men. Fearing the wrath of Saul, David takes refuge in the mountains of southern Judea with Abishai, his friend, and some others. Going under cover of darkness to the encampment of Saul, David and Abishai see Saul and all his troops fast asleep. Moreover, Saul has slept with his spear stuck to the ground beside him. Abishai sees this as an excellent God-given opportunity, so to say, for David to seek revenge and slay Saul. He says: “God has given your enemy into your hand ... Therefore let me pin him to the earth with one stroke.” Respecting the fact that Saul is still the king, i.e., God’s anointed one, David says: “Do not destroy him, for who can put forth his hand against the Lord’s anointed, and be guiltless?” So, Saul’s life is spared.
2. Interestingly, there is another similar episode narrated in 1 Sam 24:1-22 with different details. Barring differences in details, both narratives indicate David’s magnanimity in forgiving his foe, Saul, who is jealous of him and seeks to destroy him. The point to note is that David’s mercy and large-heartedness spring not from mere human thinking and logic; for, were he to use only logic, he would have killed Saul. But his thoughts transcend the commonsensical and mental realm to look at things from God’s viewpoint. Thus, David says to Saul: “The Lord rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for although the Lord gave you into my hand today, I would not put forth my hand against the Lord’s anointed.” God’s mercy—not Man’s desire for revenge—prevails in David’s decision to forgive rather than to seek revenge.
3. The gospel passage is a continuation of the ‘Beatitudes’ according to evangelist Luke. Here, Jesus turns the tables upon the old Law with its focus on cold justice and acceptance of retaliation by providing a new criterion and fresh guidelines for building relationships, namely, a family logic rather than a business one. Jesus says: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (6:36), providing God, Abba, as the root and rationale behind mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Basically, Jesus is saying that if you and I believe that God is *Abba*, Father, then we, being created “in the image and likeness of God” ought to be merciful, compassionate and forgiving. Like father, like son and like daughter! Because, if you “love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return ... you will be called “sons and daughters of the Most High,” God.

Reechoing of the theme of Mercy and Compassion in the Psalm (102): “The Lord is compassion and love” is the response to the psalm. Many verses help to reinforce the theme: God “crowns you with love and compassion”, is “compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy.” And, “As a father has compassion on his children, God has pity on those who fear him.”

Linking the 2nd Reading with the Theme of Love and Mercy: Paul observes: “We, who have been modelled on the earthly man (Adam), will be modelled on the heavenly man (Jesus).” Paul emphasizes that, with the coming of Christ, we are made aware of being children of God and animated with a message of hope and the promise of heaven. Therefore, we’re called to be more and more human, which is the same as saying we are called to be more and more divine: God-like!

Two Texts from Catholic Tradition:

St. John Chrysostom (c.349-407): “Let no one who has an enemy draw near the sacred Table, or receive the Lord’s Body! Let no one who draws near have an enemy! Do you have an enemy? Do not approach! Do you wish to draw near? Be reconciled, and then draw near, and only then touch the Holy Gifts!” (from his *Homily 20*).

Pope Francis in *Misericordiae Vultus*: “Merciful like the Father is the ‘motto’ of this Holy Year [of mercy]. In mercy, we find proof of how God loves us. We’re called to gaze more attentively on mercy so that we become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives.”

Recent Examples of Forgiveness:

Pope John Paul II: delivered a one-line heartrending homily on forgiveness on May 13, 1981, when he lay injured with two bullets in his lower intestine: “Please pray for my brother, Ali Agca, whom I have sincerely forgiven.”

Gladys Staines said: on January 23, 1999, when her husband-pastor Graham Staines and two sons were burned alive in Orissa: “When I heard that my family was murdered, I told Esther, my daughter: ‘We’ll forgive those who killed them, won’t we?’ And she said: ‘Yes, Mummy, we will’.” Later, in an interview, Gladys Staines explained: “How was I able to forgive? The truth is that I myself am a sinner. I needed Jesus to forgive me. Because I have forgiveness in my own life, it is possible for me to forgive others.”

Reflection on Love, Mercy and Forgiveness:

Jesus does not merely preach: “Tolerate or spare your enemies” but “*love* your enemies.” This teaching goes far beyond the dictates of justice. Jesus’ injunction seems superhuman. Yes, Jesus wants our love and compassion to transcend the mere natural and reflect God’s goodness. Forgiveness brings healing. It allows the other a chance to start life anew. If I have something against you and I forgive you, the bitterness leaves me. It also allows you to accept the forgiveness and move on. Forgiveness liberates both the forgiver and the forgiven. Let’s not forget that one line in the Our Father: “Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive those who sin against us.”

In Lighter Vein:

At Sunday service, when a pastor inquired of his congregation: “How many of you have forgiven your enemies and are feeling happy now?” only one old woman aged 90-plus raised her hand. The pastor continued, “Ma’am, can you tell us how this has happened?” The nonagenarian replied: “Sure! All my enemies are dead and buried; and, I’m really happy about that!”
