

The Gift of Mercy
11th Sunday after Trinity
(From the *Collect, Epistle, and Gospel*)

“O GOD, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity...”

1 Cor. 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. **10** But by the grace of God I am what I am...

Luke 18:9 And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: **10** Two men went up into the temple to pray ; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. **11** The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. **12** I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess . **13** And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying , God be merciful to me a sinner. **14** I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased ; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted .

Mercy is the last quality we are in a position of expecting from One who owes us anything but mercy. This is a very difficult reality to perceive, especially if long familiarity with our favored status as Christians has tended to cause us to take this matter of mercy for granted.

It is curious, isn't it, how easily in our thinking we can transform into entitlements those things in our lives which are undeserved gifts, as if we have merited or worked for them. The only way to avoid this tendency is through the discipline of continual self-examination. It is a scrutiny of our own souls that should always result in a higher view of God, and a lower view of self. This sort of exercise is made easier, or harder, depending upon the individual circumstance, as today's Epistle and Gospel demonstrate so clearly. St. Paul calls himself *the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*. Elsewhere, he speaks of his ministry in similar remarkably self-effacing terms:

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given , that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ... (Eph. 3:8)

How does one understand such statements coming from so great a man? Is it false humility, attempting to provoke sympathy and pity from his hearers so that he can gain stature in their sight? Or is it a sincere sentiment born out of an real and actual assessment of himself before an infinite and holy God, who, as today's Collect affirms, *declarest [His] almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity...?*

One need only read of Paul's crazed, raging hatred for Christ and the Church in order to be reminded of His very unchristian past (see Acts 8:1, 9:1-2, and his own later testimonies in Acts). In view of such darkness, the forgiveness He subsequently received in Christ must have impressed upon the very deepest reaches of His soul the greatness of the grace and mercy that he had received. His "just deserts" were overlooked, and not only was He copiously forgiven, but

He was elevated to an assignment of remarkable proportions, one that has memorialized him permanently all over the world.

But it is very important to observe that this saint did not pick himself up off the ground, after God had literally knocked him off his feet, to dust himself off, and proceed self-righteously on his way, carrying his new identity as a Christian and an apostle as if somehow they were deserved. No, we have every reason to assume that the memory of his grievous past remained ever with him as a reference point to the incredible depths that sin and self-will had brought him. *For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.* Notice that this confession is in the present tense. The sense of unworthiness is no less present even with the great passage of time. Nor has this extraordinary man allowed himself to be convinced that his great spiritual exploits subsequent to his conversion have rendered him any more worthy of claiming a favored status, of resorting to self-righteousness, than any past moment in his career. He remains grateful, and he ever will. It is precisely the acuteness of his memory, and the self-discipline necessary to maintain it, that assure him of that status of humility which is the only safe place in the Christian life, and the only guarantor of success.

We find something similar in today's Gospel. The publican who beat his breast before God is no theologian, as was the Pharisee, but he knew the only thing that matters *about* God, which, after all, is real and true theology: he knew God is merciful. He knew that God forgives sin. He knew of the temple sacrifices, of the atoning blood, of Israel's special relationship to God as a son to a father, often erring and ever being forgiven. Perhaps he knew of the Psalms, which contain many pleas for mercy from the lips of sinners. But most importantly, his feet knew the right path to take when it comes to seeking and finding mercy. This doesn't make his sins as a publican any less egregious. He deserved all of the epithets the nearby Pharisee had laid upon him, and many more. But the knowledge of these sins, and their memory, had brought him to a place of conversion. He left the temple *justified*, a changed man.

The Pharisee, however, appears within his personal experience to have no point of reference whatsoever with which to approach God on an appropriate status. He acknowledges no outstanding sins. He has no ever present memories of past serious transgressions. In fact, the only thing he has in hand when entering the presence of God is a list of accomplishments with which he is certain he has secured justification. He has with him the currency of his good works that he is certain he will be able to cash in for merit and standing before God and man. Oh, how remarkable is his misunderstanding, and how great is his ignorance! How inflated is his view of his religious duties, for he sees them as the means of gaining audience with God, rather than meagre gifts to God in response to His mercy which vastly outweighs any manner we might ever possibly find to acknowledge it! And even if he hadn't been such a bad fellow with respect to gross,

obvious sins as had Paul or the publican, he of anyone should have understood the entire tenor of Scripture, which proclaims in the loudest tones possible both the greatness of God and the sinfulness of man, and the attitude incumbent upon men because of it. He could not offer ignorance of God as an excuse.

Each of these patterns of behavior bears with it a trajectory which will end in a certain destiny. This is very important. The great Apostle, reminded of his humble beginnings, continues on in Christian service ever aware of these things, and God uses him to evangelize large portions of the Near East. True, his life will be filled with difficulty: persecution, the aggravation of criticism and mistrust even from his Christian peers, and eventual martyrdom. But with it all has been joy, and peace, and the hope and knowledge of eternal reward. The publican, we might guess, left the temple in possession of a relieved and settled conscience. We can hope that his life will continue in that vein. But the Pharisee... he will only go from bad to worse. He will ascend both in his own sight and that of his peers, and his contempt for others will increase proportionately. And when actually confronted with the nature and person of God manifest in the flesh through His Son, the enormous distance his pride has created between himself and God may well be manifest in a hatred resulting in his active participation in Christ's crucifixion.

How do these things translate into our own experience? Within the richness of our Anglican worship, we are privileged each week to bring to remembrance, at Holy Communion, both our own great need for mercy, and the abundant provision for forgiveness of sins that God has supplied us in Christ. Thank God for that regular reminder we've been given which should serve greatly to assist us in this crucial task of disciplining our thoughts and attitudes so that we remain in proper relationship to God. But for that very reason, we must be certain that our participation in the prayers, the confessions, and worship of Holy Communion are a personal statement each time we utter them, not just the mere rote repetition of words which have lost their meaning through long term usage. Like the Pharisee, we must be ever beating our breasts and saying *God be merciful to me a sinner*.

May I say that if we forget who we actually are at heart, and who God is, we will soon be reminded! It was the publican's sins that compelled him to seek mercy, and it is ours that will serve us in the same way, as well. It is only when we join the company of Pharisees, who list the sins of others rather than their own, while proudly displaying the small offerings of their good works for comparison, that we are commencing on a long, long path to a very bad end.

Allow me once again to pray together with you today's Collect:

O GOD, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*