

The Feast of Christ the King
November 19th and 20th 2016

2 Samuel 5:1–3
Psalm 122:1–5
Colossians 1:12–20
Luke 23:35–43

The Mystery of Mercy

In his document for the Year of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus*, a title that means “God wills to be merciful”, Pope Francis wrote,

“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy.”¹

On this day when the Liturgical Season ends and coincides with the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of Mercy we want to think about the mercy that is at the heart of the Kingdom we celebrate on this Feast of Christ the King. It is mercy that governs those who are subjects of this kingdom, because our King, Jesus, is full of mercy.

Listen again to the words of our Holy Father.

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.²

“We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy” What an evocative phrase whereby Pope Francis makes it clear that mercy is as vital to the soul as blood to the heart.

Thomas Aquinas in writing about the mercy of God stated:

“In every work of God, there is an element of both mercy and justice, signifying that the two are not opposed to each other. Rather, “God acts mercifully, not indeed by going against His justice, but by doing something more than justice”³

“We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy” because of what mercy is. It is God doing something more than justice.

¹ (https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html)

² Ibid

³ (ST, I, q. 21, a. 3)

The Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft explains this something more when he writes:

No one can buy heaven or force God's hand. All who are saved are saved by God's free choice to be merciful. We are saved by mercy, not by justice. Hell's citizens stand on justice and get it; heaven's citizens stand under The Mercy.⁴

It is this quality of mercy so vividly on display in today's Gospel. Here we read of Jesus promising paradise to the thief who requests for Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingly power. If Jesus was motivated only by justice – he would have rejected this thief because earlier on Good Friday this man had rejected Jesus.

What do I mean by this? When we turn to Mark's account of the Crucifixion we read these words:

So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.⁵

Did you catch that? Even the men crucified alongside him joined in the mockery; both of them. But now a few hours later the attitude of the one thief remains unchanged, but the attitude of the other now appeals to Jesus' mercy. Listen again to the Evangelist Luke:

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."⁶

And then we get to the heart of the matter as we contemplate the mystery of mercy at play in the interaction between Jesus and this man.

"Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."⁷

What did this man deserve? Justice – that is Jesus' judgment. For he had earlier rejected Jesus, and if justice primarily governed Jesus' response he would have asked: Why should I remember you, given what you said about me"? But of course he does not do this because as the Letter of James so beautifully expresses it:

⁴ Kreeft, Peter. Catholic Christianity (p. 137). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

⁵ The Holy Bible. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Mk 15:31–32). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁶ The Holy Bible. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Lk 23:39–41). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁷ The Holy Bible. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Lk 23:42–43). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

*For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.*⁸

We see in the thief's response to his fellow thief an expression of mercy extended to the Lord... "He has done nothing wrong". During the hours between his mockery and his petition there has been a change in this man's heart. Now he is able to see that Jesus is experiencing a gross injustice. The other thief who was without mercy, but still condemnatory, will not be shown mercy. But to this thief mercy will be shown in abundance.

By the way it is worth knowing this is the only person in the Gospels who addresses the Lord by only his given name: "Jesus". Every other time there is an adjective like "Lord", attached to it.

Do you see what is happening to this man? He is having an encounter with the living God. As he nears the end of his life, he moves from taunting Jesus to appealing to him in the most personal terms. For here is a man who encounters in Jesus the man who is full of mercy. And addresses him by name: "Jesus". You can't get more personal than this.

When seen in relation to the tone of the rest of the passage, this interaction stands out in marked contrast. This is an important part of the story. The other verses are characterized by the tone of anger and aggression. Here between Jesus and this man there is an island of serenity surrounded by a tumultuous stormy sea of hate and bitterness.

There are many today who ridicule Jesus just as those who at the Cross did on Good Friday.

Robert Cardinal Sarah who is a courageous and articulate bishop in the Church today is from Guinea Africa. For years now, because of his work, he has been living in Rome. In his book *God or Nothing* he has much to say about what he observes as the merciless character represented in a fundamental attitude prevalent in the Western World.

*New laws take as their point of departure anthropological foundations that are opposed to the teaching of Jesus; they are the clear indication of the burning questions that now separate men from Christ. I think that the immense economic, military, technological, and media influence of a godless West could be a disaster for the world. If the West does not convert to Christ, it could end up making the whole world pagan; the philosophy of unbelief feverishly seeks followers in new parts of the globe. In this sense, we are facing an atheism that is proselytizing more and more. The pagan culture is determined to extend the domain of its struggle against God. In order to bring about their rebirth, the former countries of the old Christian tradition need to reenergize by embarking on a new evangelization.*⁹

⁸ The Holy Bible. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Jas 2:13). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁹ Sarah, Cardinal Robert; Diat, Nicolas. God or Nothing (p. 146). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

The New Evangelization needs to be characterized by the deep and abiding mercy that is at the heart of today's gospel. We want to pray and work for the conversion of those who are hostile to Jesus. Their hostility is formed by a culture that is like the culture gathered at the foot of the Cross.

Although it is a climate that is aggressive and confrontational in its interaction with Jesus and his Church, we cannot respond in kind. Rather we are called to remember our need to constantly contemplate the mystery of mercy. A mercy that extends from the Cross out into the world. A mercy that is the life blood of every human soul because all people need to encounter the merciful savior and cry out:

Jesus remember me when you come into your kingly power.

And what is this power? It is the power of mercy to overcome hate. It is the eternal character of mercy that opens not just a holy door, but heaven's door. A door Jesus desires all people to pass through. It will be a door some will miss because of hardened hearts opposed to Jesus and embittered by human willfulness and a rejection of Jesus. But to those who turn to Jesus, paradise is promised because Christ the King wants all of his subjects to extend the medicine of mercy to a culture so far from the merciful love of Jesus. He wants all to ultimately share in His Kingdom where mercy triumphs over judgment. Where we all stand under The Mercy. For as Pope Francis wrote:

“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy.”