

The Law of the Gift

Divine Mercy Sunday 2018

There is a story about Queen Victoria of England. She was a close friend of Principal and Mrs. Tulloch of St. Andrew University in Scotland. Prince Albert died, and Queen Victoria was left alone. Just about the same time, Principal Tulloch died, and Mrs. Tulloch was left alone. Unannounced, Queen Victoria came to call on Mrs. Tulloch when Mrs. Tulloch was resting on a couch in her room. When the Queen was announced, Mrs. Tulloch struggled to rise quickly from the couch and to curtsy. The Queen stepped forward: "My dear," she said, "don't rise. I am not coming to you today as a queen to a subject, but as one woman who has lost her husband to another."

That is what God did in the person of Jesus. He came not as a removed monarch, but as one of us. In his mercy, Jesus shared in our own pain. It is this attitude of mercy that this Sunday invites us to ponder in a special way.

The Chaplet of Divine Mercy begins with this prayer:

You expired, Jesus, but the source of life gushed forth for souls, and the ocean of mercy opened up for the whole world.

Here St Faustina was given words that clearly associate the ocean of mercy that opened up for the whole world as directly to the Lord's death, as the words "you expired" indicate. It is fitting therefore that when St. John Paul II declared Divine Mercy Sunday to coincide each year with the Gospel reading for today that we are given such a vivid picture of the Divine Mercy of Jesus as we meditate on his wounds touched by St Thomas.

Today I want to think with you about one expression of Divine Mercy that is called:

"The Law of the Gift".

To help us think about this aspect of mercy let me tell this story.

"During Holy week 2012 Clara and her little 8-year-old grandson, Michael, were walking home from Holy Thursday Mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish on Staten Island. As they crossed the street, a car barreled toward them, with little Michael in the crosshairs. His Grandma Clara, pushed her grandson away to safety, taking herself the whole force of the car, and was instantly killed. Her life-giving act was made the more poignant as it came on the night before Jesus died, returning from the Mass of the Lord's Last Supper, when he spoke of his own sacrificial death and where he gave the touching example of selfless service in washing the feet of his Apostles.

Clara's large family said that she was woman of constant, heroic, selfless giving. Her merciful life was a witness to the Law of the Gift. What is the Law of the Gift? It is a phrase coined by St John Paul II and is succinctly stated this way:

“We are at our best, we are most fully alive and human, when we give away freely and sacrificially our very selves in love for another.”

Jesus stated the Law of the Gift when he said:

“Greater love than this no one has, than to give one’s life for one’s friends”

To restate this law in another way:

The more you give your being away, the more your being increases; the more you cling to your being, the more your being decreases.

Today’s Gospel reading informs us that to live with this kind of merciful sacrificial love involves our seeing that the wounds inflicted in Jesus’ body are the clearest expression of the Law of the Gift ever known to humankind. Those are most blessed in this world who inspired by these wounds are learning to live mercifully like Jesus and so practice the Law of the Gift.

So, let’s think now about how these wounds inspire us to live mercifully like Jesus.

Recall with me what our Lord instructs Thomas to do. After extending the Resurrection greeting of “Peace” a clear expression of the mercy of Jesus, he then invites the skeptical apostle to touch the place where the wounds of the crucifixion nails had pierced Jesus’ flesh. He wants Thomas to experience in a tactile way how Jesus offered his merciful body for the salvation of the world.

Notice what Jesus says next. “Do not be faithless but believing”. Of course, at the most fundamental level he means, believe in the fact that I have been raised from the dead. But at an even deeper level he is inviting Thomas to see and feel that he is the merciful saviour. It is at this point Thomas then says

“My Lord and my God”.

Now let’s sit with this picture for a minute. It is as Thomas touches the place of Jesus’ wounds that he can then call him “my Lord and my God”. It is the suffering of Jesus now manifested in his Resurrected body that inspires Thomas’ declaration. Here is what I want you to learn from this. The mercy of Jesus manifested in his crucifixion is now vindicated by his Resurrection. St Thomas Aquinas in reflecting on the Mercy of Jesus writes:

Mercy is the supreme virtue through which God’s omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree.”¹

Now think with me about the word omnipotence. It is a compound word made up of two parts. “Omni” means “all” and “potens” means “powerful”. Omnipotence means “all powerful” Here is the fundamental paradox of the Christian faith. The God of the universe is most powerful when

¹ Francis, Pope (2013-11-02). The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium (pp. 22-23). Pauline Books and Media. Kindle Edition

he is seemingly at his weakest and most vulnerable. It is thus the mercy of Jesus whereby God's greatest power is made known. This was something Thomas clearly saw and can therefore declare:

you are my Lord and my God.

This means that the attribute of mercy is the most important virtue not only of God but also in the lives of those who with Thomas declare "Jesus you are my Lord and my God". Those are most blessed in this world who are embodying mercy in how they relate to others. Why? Because then the Law of the Gift allows us to not only appropriate the mercy of Jesus in our own lives but in turn allows us to then live mercifully in relation to others. There is, says St. Thomas, no power greater than this. For it is the power of love.

This has a very clear application for us. When we understand God's, omnipotence is shown primarily through mercy, St Peter's will have an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy. In the Joy of the Gospel listen to the encouragement of Pope Francis:

Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The Lord gets involved and he involves his own, as he kneels to wash their feet. He tells his disciples: "You will be blessed if you do this" (Jn 13: 17). A merciful community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.²

Here is the clear connection to today's Gospel. It is through expressing mercy that we will with St. Thomas touch the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Such people, says Jesus, are truly blessed because they are tapping into the greatest power known to humankind. The mercy that gushed forth for souls, and the ocean of mercy opened up for the whole world. It is to recall the importance of this mercy, shown to a distinct way to St Thomas and St. Faustina that this day was declared Divine Mercy Sunday by St John Paul II in 2000. On April 30th of that year when he Canonized Sister Mary Faustina Kowalska, John Paul II said in his homily these words:

It is not easy to love with a deep love, which lies in the authentic gift of self. This love can only be learned by penetrating the mystery of God's love. Looking at him, being one with his

² Francis, Pope (2013-11-02). The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium (p. 16). Pauline Books and Media. Kindle Edition.

fatherly heart, we can look with new eyes at our brothers and sisters, with an attitude of unselfishness and solidarity, of generosity and forgiveness. All this is mercy!...³

Such love, such mercy is only possible when we are willing to touch the wounds of the Resurrected Christ. Such love is the greatest power in the world because it is the ultimate expression of God's omnipotence. This was something Grandma Clara witnessed to with her life and in her death. Something Queen Victoria exhibited to a widow like her.

It is the Law of the Gift that is expressed by all of those who sincerely and whole heartedly say with St. Thomas:

“My Lord and My God.”

³ Weigel, George (2009-10-13). Witness to Hope (p. 880). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.