

Lent 3

In baseball there is a rule that says if the game is two thirds of the way through the 9 innings of a full game, and one team is 10 runs ahead of the other, the game is called off. The leading team is declared the victor. It is known as the mercy rule. One team is saved the ignominy of having to continue and complete the encounter when the winner is obvious. The defeat of the other team does not have to be so drawn out. Some grace is shown towards the vanquished in such a mismatch.

Mercy.

Mercy is a quality we see in God. In our prayers we pray, to a “merciful God”. We pray for mercy. Mercy is a quality we are expected to show. And mercy is the quality that is the subject of our readings today. It is also appropriate to reflect upon mercy in our own Lenten journey this year – and our life together as the West Hawthorn Uniting Church.

Mercy – so what is it?

Mercy is not the same as forgiveness. . . though they can be linked.

Forgiveness is wiping the slate clean; blotting out all wrongdoing and sinfulness. With forgiveness it is as if something never happened. On the other hand, mercy does not avoid the consequences of an action, but there is all the same applied some grace and understanding. In the Old Testament, mercy is a covenant word. A word that is related to God and the Children of Israel keeping their promises: “I am your God, you are my people; keep my law, and I will watch over you.” Mercy is shown if the law is not kept - although the law still stands and keeping it is expected. In our sporting illustration, the victor still wins, the loser still loses – although the process of getting to that point is a little more – well, merciful. Mercy indeed comes from that group of Hebrew words associated with *hesed*: a word we usually translate as “lovingkindness”. It is a quality of God to show this mercy.

Our readings today emphasise mercy, the mercy of God.

The Isaiah reading is a passage of abundant joy and exuberance. A passage in which the children of Israel are reminded that even though they had forsaken the covenant, and been taken to their Babylonia exile, God was still their God and would deal generously with them. The image is a banquet, a meal – a meal we indeed recall in our service of Holy Communion. Verse 7, however, then says

“Let the wicked forsake their ways, and the unrighteous their thoughts:
Let them return to the Lord, that **God may have mercy on them**, and to our God, for
God will abundantly pardon.”

God will show mercy.

Our passage from Luke is also fundamentally about God’s mercy. Jesus begins by addressing the perennial, and one is tempted to say, the immature view of God, that when bad things happen to people it is simply God punishing people because they have sinned. This is a very mechanistic view of God. Jesus counters that view with reference to two contemporary incidents in his

homeland. The first was a rather gruesome exercise of imperial power in which the blood of some slain Galileans was used in Pilate's own worship of the Imperial cult. The second concerned a failure of building regulations, or perhaps an earth tremor, who knows, but a tower in Jerusalem collapsed killing eighteen people. Jesus simply asks, are all these folk really worse than others? Or more pointedly, are these people any worse than you or I. Are we this day any better or worse than the innocent folk slain in Christchurch? Jesus emphatically says **No**. However, he still emphasises all have sinned and all should repent. Our sinning still has consequences and needs our response.

It is then in this context Jesus tells the story or parable of mercy.

The story itself is simple enough. A man has a fig tree, a mature fig tree. There are no figs on it. He orders that it be chopped down. Why would he keep it – get rid of it. The gardener – some early greenie or environmentalist – pleaded that this not be the case. Another chance should be given. Give it a good dig, apply some manure – give it a lot of care and attention. Let us see what might happen. Well we don't know what happens – but at that point, the gardener's words seem to determine the matter:

“If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.”

Mercy is shown. Another chance is given. The ultimate consequence is still mentioned. The tree may still be chopped down. In the meantime, there is an opportunity given to turn the situation around. There is a stay of execution. Crude economics does not triumph immediately.

Indeed, mercy is frequently and usefully expressed as time – extra time we are given. As we say in our more traditional prayers of confession – we pray for time, ‘time for the amendment of life’. Not only do we seek forgiveness of our sins – we seek time, time to turn our lives around. Time to live our lives differently. We seek mercy.

This is a good way to focus our thinking during this period of Lent. It is not so much what you may give up – and then come Easter immediately resume consumption of coffee or chocolate or cream puffs or what ever. Rather, in this time we are given in Lent, how may we - positively – amend our life, so that we may live with integrity and faithfully follow the way of Christ? We have God's mercy to do this. We always have God's mercy to do this.

Dramatically we may do this if we have been told we have only a short time to live. “It is an aggressive cancer, these will be the effects, and we would expect you, at your age to live for another three months.” What would you do? When my father received such a prognosis, we went on a road trip together, father and son - just to visit the places where he had lived, where he had ministered (he was a retired minister). We said hello to people – but it was more of a farewell. In short, we did the things we would regret if we had not done them before he died. It was difficult, but it was good. . . . I believe with lasting consequences for my father and my self.

Indeed have you noticed the increasing number of books out now with titles like – 1000 places to visit before you die, or 1000 things to do, or eat or drink before you die. Books, may I suggest, true secular books, simply reminding us that the goal in life is more than a life full of our obsessions such as our career or things or money or whatever. There are other things to do as well. Life should be regarded as being merciful, God is merciful – we are given time to refocus

our priorities and values, and we can do that. So in Lent we can consider God's mercy, being like that extra year we have been given after there was a bit of digging around the base of our lives and actually feeding our lives appropriately.

Every person I have ever spoken to who has been given a reprieve - they were not expected to live through their heart attack, or their cancer or accident, and yet they survived, says: they now live life differently. Mercy, if we can understand it, gives us a new life and energy and hope.

So what may this mean to this congregation, and the congregations of this region? Well great mercy has been shown in our life together. Quite simply the heritage we have here (and in the other congregations of our region) has been because of the mercy of God. True, at one level that history is perhaps remarkably sad, even tragic. How many congregations we know to have existed hereabouts, and now no longer exist. I don't know the local scene well enough - however, when we did this exercise at Carlton (I was the minister there, at the Church of All Nations) we found that at the beginning of the 20th century there were 10 churches representing protestant denominations of the Methodist, Presbytery and Congregational churches, and that there then only remained the one - Church of All Nations. Now some of those congregations, like the fig tree in the parable, were chopped down, not so much because they were unfruitful, but because there were church unions along the way. This was good news about unity in Christ, and not decline and unfruitfulness. However, there were still lean, very lean periods, and the very future of that congregation in Carlton was in question at various points. However, mercy was shown. The tree was tended, fertilizer was applied and it grew and prospered. Such mercy unleashed a fruitful time.

Today in the Uniting Church we agonise over the vibrancy and the energy of Christ's church. We wonder whether it is able to survive, and if so, how? We spend a lot of time considering whether this congregation or that congregation may survive, or should it merge or whatever. Such thoughts have (even) been cast over life here. We as a denomination perhaps do not spend enough time, nor do we as a congregation spend enough time, considering that in fact we are here today because of the mercy of God. We have this time together. God is merciful.

However, mercy was been extended, whatever time has been given - shouldn't that be reflected in our new life and energy, like say, a heart transplant patient shows when they are given new chance at life, or a prisoner who is shown mercy in their sentencing, or the fig tree and the gardener of this parable shows. Mercy is a valuable gift to give; it is perhaps even more valuable to realise we have been extended mercy. Surely we should reflect that opportunity and grace in our life together.