

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

Today I will focus on a quality. It is that of mercy.

When we read some passages within our Bible, mercy may seem in short supply. Words of judgement, calling for us to repent or perish, may seem so rigid and harsh that mercy seems distant. We heard some of them in the opening part of the Gospel passage – twice it is written: “unless you repent, you will all perish as they did”. Yet even amid those words there is hope to be found – we believe that repentance is met with forgiveness, and in forgiveness, there is mercy. From there, we can draw hope that in encountering God, we meet face to face with the God of mercy.

When I read the parable of the fig tree, I was struck by how important the gardener’s mercy was within the parable.

The vineyard owner comes to the tree and finds no fruit on it, and this for the third year running. He responds with frustration and impatience (though three years is a long time to wait with expectation). He wants the tree removed immediately and replaced with something that will fruit, and will not waste the energy of the soil in which it is growing. He is being a rationalist, thinking about the best and most productive use of his land, and how it can be best tended and kept. In the desert climate of the Middle East and in the times before modern agricultural technology and processes, trees needed to be productive to be worthy of the space and water they used.

Then the gardener speaks up. He asks for one more year before the tree faces being cut down. He says that he will tend the fig tree and care for it, he will nourish its soil and ensure it is healthy. He will give it the best of opportunities, and in his own words, “if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down”. The gardener represents mercy and patience. He embodies the giving of another chance, the willingness to nurture something a little longer, and see what results.

While the parable ends there, and we do not hear the response of the vineyard owner, I like to think that they eagerly accept the suggestion, and encourage the gardener in their work. I also like to think that when the year is up, there would be abundant fruit on that fig tree, ripe and ready to be picked.

Turning to literature, Shakespeare wrote a magnificent description of mercy in a speech from the *Merchant of Venice*, delivered by Portia.

She remarks that “The quality of mercy is not strain’d. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.” She continues, “But mercy is above this scepter’d sway. It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings; It is an attribute to God Himself; And earthly power doth then show likest God’s when mercy seasons justice.”

Mercy is indeed a double gift, blessing those who offer mercy, and those who receive it. Like rain, it nourishes the world and all that is in it – it is life-giving. It is also something necessary for good leadership. Portia speaks of mercy being in the heart of kings, but when we act from a position of mercy, whoever we are, we will make decisions that are compassionate and wise.

Then Portia proclaims mercy as “an attribute to God himself”. This is true, and Jesus embodied divine mercy in his incarnation, and brought mercy to earth that we might learn, and grow, from the encounter. This is why Jesus taught his disciples this parable of mercy, so that they could become more like the gardener, and approach all that they did with both dedication, wisdom and mercy.

My hope for us all is that our thoughts, words and actions will be tempered by mercy, and that this season of Lent draws us closer to the mercy of God, which we are freely given, and can never earn.

I’ll end with a prayer first published in the 1560s in a work known as *Lidley’s Prayers*, which was set to music by Richard Farrant in the late 16th Century and has become a classic within short pieces of sacred repertoire. It calls upon God’s mercy, asks for forgiveness and ultimately hopes that we might change our ways and be drawn closer to God.

Lord, for thy tender mercy’s sake, lay not our sins to our charge,
but forgive that is past, and give us grace to amend our sinful lives.

To decline from sin and incline to virtue,
that we may walk in a perfect heart before thee, now and evermore. Amen.

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All Saints, South Hobart, and St Raphael’s Fern Tree
The Third Sunday in Lent
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