

GRACE AND MERCY

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One of the marks of a smart institution is that its china has its shield or motto imprinted on every piece. Go to dinner at any British Embassy across the world and every cup, saucer, every plate will have the royal arms upon it. Oxbridge Colleges and indeed other universities are much the same if you dine in hall. Even the theological college that I attended was the same. Indeed the year that I left, the college merged with another seminary and all the china was auctioned off to students. A prize commodity were the chamber pots – made all the more attractive by the college motto printed on them. It was: *Guard the deposit*. Not a bad slogan for a chamber pot!

But more seriously, that motto came from our second reading, today's epistle: 'Guard the deposit' – or better still perhaps in modern translation, 'Guard the good treasure entrusted to you.' But what precisely is that treasure? Presumably it means the message encapsulated in Jesus, in his being among us as a human being, and in his teaching too. What, then, do we see of God in Jesus? Well, of course, a proper answer to that question would detain us here for a lifetime – countless, even myriad books have been written to summarise the import of God in Jesus.

So, instead of holding you here for eternity, let's discover a little more of just two words about God's nature caught in the aspic of our readings this morning. The first issues from that most beautiful piece from the Old Testament book, *Lamentations*:

'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.'

Throughout, that verse is not only of great beauty, but it is also profound. It is the word, *mercy*, upon which I shall focus in that extract. But before I do, let me move on to the epistle and again to just one word:

'Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.'

This time it is the word *grace* upon which we might focus. It's a word which recurs over and over again in the New Testament and, of course, on countless occasions, we say 'The Grace' together. Often too, especially at great dinners, and in communities, and even in families – we say a *grace* before the meal.

Grace is a beautiful word. To say someone is gracious is always a great compliment. Or, to say that an object, a person, a movement is *graceful*, is equally complimentary. At heart, grace simply means *gift*. Jesus is God's *gracious* gift to humanity. Grace is never earned; it is simply given. To receive a gift with grace is not to snatch at it, or to grasp it. Instead it is to receive it with wonder at the generosity that lies behind the gift. Grace recurs again and again in the New Testament since it underlies all that exists – nothing can be, nothing can flourish without God's grace. We can *do* nothing but for God's grace that makes it possible. Hubris and selfish pride cannot exist alongside grace.

But what about *mercy*? It's interesting that one of the words that has fallen most frequently from the lips of the present Pope is *mercy*. When the Roman synod of bishops debated the place

of the family, Pope Francis called for *mercy* and not law. Mercy is a word impregnated, entirely composed of love. Every one of us is fallible and flawed, but God's *mercy* means that his steadfast love never ceases; it is new every morning, it never comes to an end. He will never abandon us despite everything.

This Sunday could hardly be a better day for remembering the pre-eminence of *grace* and *mercy*. For this coming Tuesday is the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis overflowed with both mercy and grace. It's not hard to see why, for he was one of very few people in history to take Jesus' teaching literally. After his conversion he lived the life of his Lord. You will all know his story. Born into wealth and status he became a soldier fighting against nearby Perugia; then he became a playboy, and a troubadour. But, despite all this, kneeling in a broken down and humble chapel at San Damiano, on the edge of Assisi, he heard Jesus speak from the crucifix just above him: 'Francis, rebuild my church,' Jesus said. Francis did just that. He rebuilt San Damiano, but effectively, even within his lifetime, he renewed the ailing mediaeval church. His father disowned him – Francis stripped in the main square of Assisi as a sign of embracing poverty. Only last week, I finished a brief and most telling novel that captured Francis' vision and challenged me again so sharply. It was called simply *Chasing Francis*. It reminded me of the Franciscan-inspired community in Rome – and now across the world – the community of Sant Egidio.

In Rome now S. Egidio runs soup kitchens for the poorest and outcast – illegal immigrants and others. Every evening, food parcels are made up for the poor and taken out to the poorest most wretched parts of Rome. On one evening only, I myself helped make some up and take them out. Nearby to all this, is a residential home for mothers living with AIDS – their babies are with them. Desmond Tutu opened next door a language school to help destitute immigrants learn Italian.

So, Francis, eight hundred years later still lives on. He fell in love with God, the God he encountered in Jesus, and lived the life of his Lord. He died at the age of forty four spent by the *mercy* and *grace* he'd expended. Already, even before he died, some thirty thousand people were following in his footsteps. That is mercy and grace: that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Readings

Lamentations. 3. 19-26.

II Timothy 1. 1-14.

Luke. 17. 5-10.