

The Quality of Mercy

Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, Carmelite Solitary

I think we can get a good idea of what people are wanting when we look at the kind of devotion that inspires them, and one of the things I notice is how the concept of mercy appeals so deeply across the board.

The devotion to the Divine Mercy is one of those devotions whose form does not particularly appeal to me, but its popularity says something about what people are desperate for, what they want and hope for - mercy. But they want that mercy to be in the context of relationships, human and divine. There is something off balance about a way of prayer that is overly concerned with the mercy of God just for me, and my avoidance of hell and eternal punishment.

Mercy in the context of relationships

Mercy in the context of relationships means that somewhere there is someone who loves me and forgives me. That somewhere there is someone who does not judge me harshly but accepts me as I am, just for who I am; that somewhere there is someone to whom I can cry out at the last moment like the penitent thief on the cross "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" and I will be welcomed home by a love that is merciful to me in all my weakness and neediness.

When we look at the appeal of someone like St. Thérèse of Lisieux it is not just the concept of love that is at the heart of her doctrine of the Little Way, but the concept of merciful love - a love that condescends to our weakness, a love that does not judge, but accepts and raises us up.

For ourselves too, is it not true that we, like those who approach us, hope to find someone who knows and loves us just as we are, yet who also challenges us to realise our undeveloped potential and encourages us to be all we can be?

A gift to be received

"It was not because you were great that God chose you, but simply because he loved you" (Deut 7:7) God says to Israel in the words of *Deuteronomy*. And God continued to love and cherish Israel despite all her infidelity and sin. Nevertheless God did not renege on the Divine commands, it was these that Israel had to carry out in order to be a witness to the nations of God's love and eternal fidelity, not just towards themselves but to everyone.

Looking back over their lives St. Teresa of Avila and St. Thérèse of Lisieux looked, as it were, into the well of their own experience; and what they saw reflected back to them was the face of Jesus as a face of mercy and love.

"Misericordias Domine in aeternum cantabo", Teresa of Avila wrote as a prelude to the book of her *Life*; while Thérèse said that her *Story of a Soul* was just putting on record the tale of God's mercy to one of the world's "little ones". She had earned nothing - all was grace, not least God's choice of her, God's sustaining love, God's continual forgiveness.

What sometimes makes it difficult for people to see the face of Christ in our faces and in the face of the official Church is not the demands that are made and the high ideals that are put before them. What makes it difficult is that so often religion does not seem to have anything to say to them on the level of personal relationships (apart from sex) and the level of mercy rather than judgment.

The dictionary defines mercy as “Compassion, forbearance, shown by one to another (especially the offender) who is in his power and has no claim to kindness”. Mercy is not earned, it is there – freely offered, freely to be received in a context of persons. Mercy is not about pretending that something hasn't happened, that sin doesn't matter. Mercy is about facing into reality and accepting to love and be loved as one is, not as one wants to be.

Insights from Teresa and Thérèse

On that note I'd like to look at the insights of Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux on encountering the God of mercy in prayer, and being the face of mercy for others; and I'll do this in conjunction with the story of the Samaritan Woman in *John* Chapter 4, where we see Jesus encountering someone and speaking to her from the reality of her own experience, but also leading her beyond it to become an apostle.

This story was deeply loved by both Teresas, and both wrote of it, seeing it as a type of relationship where Jesus and another person are relating in a context of need and of mercy that affects both sides. The woman is looking for love in that she has had a succession of husbands. Jesus is also looking for a response of love through establishing a dialogue with her.

Jesus needs the mercy of the Samaritan woman whom he asks for a drink. The woman needs the mercy of God because of her personal situation. Her life is in a mess. She's nothing but a middle aged tart, having had five husbands and now living with yet another man to whom she hasn't even bothered to get married. No wonder she is coming to the well in the middle of the day when others won't be about. Yet this is just where Jesus comes to meet her. He does not judge; he does not say “If you just get your married life in order I've a gift to give”. Rather he takes her where she is and makes her an apostle from right within her own situation of shame and marginalisation, because she is honest and humble. “I have no husband.” “You speak truly.” She puts herself on the line and acknowledges that she is as she is, and it is from there that Jesus enters into a relationship with her - not at some ideal point in the future but right there where she actually is.

Jesus doesn't say “Get someone else from the village, I want to tell them about the living water I'm offering; you're no good”. He offers it to her; she has only to ask. In the end it is this despised woman who brings the whole town to belief and salvation, yet she certainly wouldn't have been considered possible material for the UCM!

In the previous chapter Jesus has told Nicodemus that the Spirit is like the wind blowing where it will. Here we see a concrete example of it in a woman who is an outcast and a shame to herself and to the town, and yet because she doesn't pretend that things are otherwise she is open to encounter Jesus in friendship, in mutuality of need, in truth and in mercy.

Seeking truth

Real spirituality is born from life experience - our own and others'. When we drop our masks and pretences and face reality, then we are open to God's grace. If we continue in our disguises and masks: "I'm really a good person underneath it all, just look at how I celebrate the liturgy etc." then we shall die not knowing the truth. And if we do not live in the truth ourselves, how can we draw others to Christ who is Truth Incarnate?

At the end of her life St. Thérèse could say: "I have sought nothing but the truth". In her autobiography she writes, "O Jesus, show me if my desires are futile. I only want to be told the truth". I want to know what is real and what isn't. I don't want to live in illusion. This unflinching devotion to truth was central to her life, because she believed that in the truth we will find mercy and salvation. In the truth we will touch reality. In the truth we discover that we are loved with a love full of mercy and compassion.

Teresa of Avila herself found healing as she learned to walk in the truth, which she termed walking in humility. "One day", she writes, "as I was pondering on why our Lord dearly loves this virtue of humility it dawned on me that humility is truth, and God is the supreme truth...whoever ignores this lives a life of falsehood." Elsewhere she says in the *Mansions* that humility is the foundation of the whole edifice of prayer, and in the Way of Perfection that it is the most important thing of all when we start to give our lives to God. By walking in the truth, she says, "I do not mean just that we should not tell falsehoods, but that we should act with perfect truth before God and others. And above all that we should not wish to be thought better than we are." Difficult! We love to act. We love to put on a good face. We are so quick to excuse ourselves and explain away our failures. "I was tired." "So and so pressed me too hard, no wonder I blew up." "I'm no saint." etc. and then I put my pious mask back on. All this kills true relationships where we are as we are without disguise or acting.

Removing masks

Hypocrisy comes from the Greek word for a mask, as used by an actor on stage. To remove our masks is painful, but that's the only way we shall become really real.

Now Thérèse is so attractive because she totally refused to wear a mask. She was as she was with the simplicity of a child. When asked by her sister, as she lay dying, to say a few edifying words to the doctor who was an unbeliever, she merely responded: "No, let the doctor think what he likes. What's the use of putting on an act, the act of a pious nun? No, let others think as they like! I shall be true to myself - that's all."

The psychologist M. Scott Peck wrote a book called *The Road Less Travelled* and subtitled it 'a new psychology of love, traditional values and spiritual growth'. In it he says that there are four essential areas of discipline that enable love to grow in a person:

- the ability to delay gratification
- to balance conflicting demands
- to take responsibility for one's own life
- and lastly - devotion to truth.

Because when we come down to it the facts are friendly, and accepting the facts takes less energy than trying to conceal them. "I have no husband", "I have lost my self-respect", "I trampled on another's feelings", or whatever. These are the facts, so why try to hide them? "We should walk in perfect truth before God and others, and above all we should not wish to be thought better than we are." (Teresa of Avila) Why? Because we want to be loved and accepted for the person we are, not for the person we are not!

But above all we see that, for Thérèse, Truth is a Person, the person of Jesus. She is called to relate to him in prayer and in life. And she finds him merciful. His love is a love full of mercy for her weakness, full of forgiveness when she falls. Writing to her sister Leonie, the family 'failure' Thérèse says that she has only to take Jesus by the heart as a child does. When she falls she must fly into Jesus' arms as a child, full of trust as in a loving parent, rather than hiding away feeling that she has once more let God (and herself) down.

When commenting on the story of the Samaritan woman in her letter to Marie (Manuscript B in *Story of a Soul*), Thérèse writes: "Jesus was thirsty for love, the love of this one despised creature". He wanted love, and he offered her love and respect as she was. Then Thérèse goes on to say "I feel continually more conscious of it, the deep need our Lord has to be loved. At every point this love is ignored, set aside, treated lightly by those who follow the call of the world. But even among those dedicated to him, how few there are who give themselves to him without reserve, who really understand the tenderness of his infinite love."

Letting go

How few give themselves without reserve. It is in the giving without reserve that we come to understand the infinite tenderness and mercy of God. Abandonment comes hard to us because we want to keep areas for self. We are afraid to let go of our disguises and walk in humility and truth, with absolute trust - in the love and mercy of the Lord.

In prayer Thérèse would encourage us to let go, to come before the Lord just as we are, just as the Samaritan woman did, and realise that God is not judging. He is accepting us and asking for nothing but our love in return. He is just longing to give the living water to those who ask, not those who deserve.

Thérèse spent most of her prayer time pondering the Gospels and she gleaned from them her knowledge of the Lord - not from textbooks of theology, not mystical flights, not what others said about the sternness of God. She found in the gospels the Jesus who welcomes the prodigal, who accepts the Magdalene, who gives the Good Thief paradise at the last moment because he trusts that even for him, there can be life and forgiveness.

Thérèse takes people as they are and knows that God takes her as she is. Her family's love and acceptance was crucial in her own spiritual growth, but she also moved far beyond the criteria of "good behaviour", God smiling on a good girl and punishing a naughty one. Her place in her own family certainly influenced her writing on 'littleness' as a way of drawing down the love of God on one who was small and unworthy.

But above all Thérèse realised that abandonment to the merciful love of God, in all her weakness and neediness, was the key to spiritual growth. She didn't have

to earn love. She didn't have to placate God by keeping the rules perfectly. She could be as she was, and relax.

Caryll Houselander, our own English mystic who lived in London for most of her life, knew herself as a deeply wounded person, a “failure” in many ways, an “odd bod”. But that very fact enabled her to enter into the minds and hearts of others who were also in some way on the margins, as was the Samaritan woman.

Caryll loved Thérèse, and wrote in one of her own books that “The beginning of sanctity lies not in effort but surrender. Holiness isn't about gritting our teeth and doing without cream cakes for tea and kneeling in a cold church. Holiness is just letting God be God to us, showing to us the face of mercy, surrendering ourselves NOW; not waiting until we are better, more prayerful, more penitential, more able to cope; i.e. when we are strong and are “making it” on our own. We have to surrender NOW in all our weakness and uniqueness. Then knowing ourselves to be loved we will be enabled to become the merciful face of God for others.

Thérèse didn't fight her weakness and powerlessness. Instead she grew to love it. And because she grew to understand that God loved her as weak and little she was totally transformed by him. She stopped her rule-bound efforts and surrendered herself to all the tenderness and love he wanted to pour out on her but which she was blocking.

Let us look back at our own lives, look down the well with the Samaritan woman who was outwardly a “failure” and a no-good, and see gazing back at us the merciful face of God.

Reflecting God's mercy

The other side of God's merciful love for us is the demand that we show mercy to others. Thérèse took this very seriously as a guide to her actions. She acknowledged that some people are not naturally loveable while others are. To reflect God is to love in such a way that others are changed by their encounter with us, rather than demanding that they change first before we will enter into a relationship with them.

A merciful heart is modelled on that of the father of the prodigal son. The elder brother has behaved. He has done everything he should have done. So he cannot understand why his brother should be welcomed home with joy after a profligate life. Thérèse takes the attitude - why not welcome the prodigal? I have stayed home like the elder brother only because of God's prevenient grace; but I don't begrudge the other's welcome, the way God leads another person. I am with God always, and all God has is mine. I don't want a party or special thanks. I'm willing to go on when I feel nothing, when I don't experience any special signs of love. I believe that I am loved without this kind of proof. Let Jesus sleep. I won't wake him up.

My part is not to dictate how God should act with others. I have confidence in how he deals with me. Therefore I can welcome the Magdalen, the prodigal, the good thief, with joy and magnanimity, rejoicing that no one is excluded. It is never too late.

There is a fine balance between doing all I can to show love to others, and doing all I can to love God, while also allowing the other to be 'other', to respect their story, and make it easy for them to discover the merciful face of God through the merciful love reflected in my own face, my own life.

“Lord, give me that living water, that I may never thirst.”