

CHRIST REVEALS THE FATHER'S MERCY

MERCY IN SACRED SCRIPTURE

Among the dialogues of God with Moses recorded in the Book of Exodus, there is a scene shrouded in mystery where Moses asks the Lord to show him his face. *You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.*¹ When the fullness of time comes, Philip makes the same petition to Jesus, in one of those conversations filled with trust that the Apostles had with the Master: *Lord, show us the Father.*² The reply of God Incarnate is immediate: *He who has seen me has seen the Father.*³

Jesus reveals the Father. When we meditate on the Gospels we can discover the features of God—including, first and foremost, his mercy—made known by the simplicity of Jesus' words and life. Divine mercy, which God revealed throughout the history of the Chosen People, shines brightly in the Word Incarnate. In Him, “the face of the Father's mercy,”⁴ we see fully realized the tender prayer that the Lord had taught Moses for the priests to use when blessing the children of Israel: *The Lord bless you and keep you: the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*⁵ In Jesus, God makes his face shine definitively upon us, and grants us the peace the world cannot give.⁶

God who seeks us and listens

Right from the first pages of Genesis, we are shown the mercy of God. After their sin, Adam and Eve hide among the trees in the garden, because they experience their nakedness, and they no longer dare to look God in the face. But the Lord immediately comes forth to find them. “If that moment of sin marks the beginning of his exile from God, there is already a promise of return, a possibility of return. God immediately asks: ‘Adam, where are you?’ He seeks him out.”⁷ The Lord makes known to them the future triumph over the serpent's offspring, and he even makes them some garments of skin as a sign that, despite their sin, his love for them has not died out.⁸ God closes the door of paradise behind them,⁹ but on the horizon he opens the door of mercy: *For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.*¹⁰

In the Book of Exodus, the Lord acts decisively to free the oppressed Israelites. His words to Moses from the burning bush, like those in Genesis, echo down the centuries. *I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I*

¹ *Exod* 33:23.

² *Jn* 14:8.

³ *Jn* 14:9.

⁴ Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, no. 1.

⁵ *Num* 6:24-26.

⁶ Cf. *Jn* 14:27.

⁷ Pope Francis, Homily, 7 April 2013; cf. *Gen* 3:9.

⁸ Cf. *Gen* 3:14-21.

⁹ Cf. *Gen* 3:24.

¹⁰ *Rom* 11:32.

know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.¹¹ What an example for us, who are sometimes slow to listen and to put into practice what others need from us! God is a good Father, who sees the tribulation of his children and intervenes to give them freedom. After they cross the Red Sea, in the solemn setting of Sinai, the Lord shows himself to Moses as a *God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*¹²

A “visceral” love

Psalm 86 repeats the phrase from Exodus almost word for word: “*Deus miserator*” (*raham*) et “*misericors*” (*hanun*), “*patiens et multae misericordiae*” (*hesed*) “*et veritatis*” (*emet*).¹³ In his translation of the Bible into Latin, Saint Jerome chose to translate three Hebrew concepts with three practically synonymous terms, derived from the Latin word *miser cordia*. These three concepts are indeed connected, but each of them contributes a nuance that it is worthwhile analyzing if we wish to appreciate the full extent of God’s mercy, which cannot be expressed in a single word.

The adjective *raham* (*miserator*) is derived from *re hem*, which means “bowels, viscera, womb,” and is used in the Bible to speak of the birth of a living being.¹⁴ *Rahum* describes the feelings of a mother for the being who is literally flesh of her flesh. *Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*¹⁵ “God has a tenderness for us like a mother when she takes her child into her arms, wanting only to love, protect, help, ready to give all, even her very self. That is the image that this term suggests. A love, therefore, which may be defined in a good sense as ‘visceral.’”¹⁶ A love that suffers especially when faced with forgetfulness, contempt, or neglect by the children. *My people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?*¹⁷

But at the same time, it is a love that is always ready to forgive them and to overlook any coldness, since God *does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love.*¹⁸ It is a love that takes pity on the misfortunes the children may fall into with the passing of the years—*I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal*¹⁹—and does not let up in its effort to bring them back if they have strayed. It is a solicitous love, eager to protect the children if they are being mistreated or persecuted. *Fear not, O Jacob my servant, says the Lord, nor be dismayed, O Israel; for lo, I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid.*²⁰ It is a welcoming and affectionate love, right down to the smallest details: *Come, buy wine and milk*

¹¹ *Exod* 3:7-8.

¹² *Exod* 34:6. An almost identical expression is repeated in several places in Sacred Scripture, especially in Psalms 86(85):15, and 103(102):8.

¹³ *Ps* 86(85):15.

¹⁴ For example, *Exod* 13:2: *Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb [re hem] among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.*

¹⁵ *Is* 49:15.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Audience, 13 January 2016.

¹⁷ *Mic* 6:3.

¹⁸ *Mic* 7:18.

¹⁹ *Jer* 30:17.

²⁰ *Jer* 46: 27.

*without money and without price.*²¹ It is a love that teaches us to be concerned about others, to suffer with their sufferings, and to rejoice with their joys; to be truly close to those around us, with our prayer and interest, visiting the sick... giving of our time.

God is also described as *hanun* (*misericors*). This adjective, which could be translated as “compassionate,” is derived from the word *hen*, which means “grace” or “favor”: something that is offered out of pure benevolence, and that goes beyond strict justice. It expresses the attitude of God which is reflected in one of the commandments of the Covenant code: *If ever you take your neighbor’s garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for that is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate (hanun).*²² This commandment is inspired by compassion for the poor man, who is unable to pay what in justice he ought. The Lord cannot stand seeing him suffering, and that compassion, which God inspires in those who are his own, opens the path to true justice. *For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.*²³ A person who truly knows God readily recognizes a brother or sister who is suffering. How many opportunities for serving others we will discover if we ask our Lord for this compassionate outlook! The Jubilee of Mercy is a good opportunity for us to join others in doing some of the corporal works of mercy, wherever we find ourselves.

A faithful God, who waits for us

Psalm 86 also says that the Lord is a God of great mercy, “*multae misericordiae*” (*hesed*), using a word that can be translated literally as “piety.” It refers above all to the loving respect between parents and children, and also between spouses. Therefore, when Jacob, now very elderly, is about to die, he calls his son Joseph and asks him: *promise to deal loyally (hesed) and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt.*²⁴ That is, he asks him to act as befits a good son and to fulfill his father’s last wish. Saying that God abounds in *hesed* is the same as saying that God always looks upon us as his children: his gifts and his call are irrevocable.²⁵

“It is also said of this merciful God that he is ‘*slow to anger*,’ literally, ‘of great breadth,’ that is, having a *broad capacity of forbearance and patience*. God knows how to wait, his time is not the impatient one of man; he is like the wise farmer who knows how to wait, allowing time for the good seed to grow, in spite of the weeds (cf. *Mt 13:24-30*).”²⁶

Finally, the Lord’s mercy is governed by the abundance of truth: *et veritatis* (*emet*). For mercy is not a pretence that masks the offenses and wounds as if they didn’t exist; the wounds are not bandaged over “without first curing them and treating them,”²⁷ because they would become infected. Our Lord is a “physician, and he heals our selfishness, if we let his grace penetrate to the depth of our soul.”²⁸ Letting him cure us means recognizing that we are sinners, showing our wounds with the readiness to use the means needed to cure them. “Show your

²¹ *Is 55:1.*

²² *Exod 22:26-27.*

²³ *Hos 6:6.*

²⁴ *Gen 47:29.*

²⁵ Cf. *Rom 11:29.*

²⁶ Pope Francis, Audience, 13 January 2016.

²⁷ Pope Francis, Speech, 18 October 2014.

²⁸ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 93.

wound so that it gets properly healed and all possibility of infection is removed, even if doing this hurts you as much as having an operation.”²⁹ And then our Lord promises that *though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*³⁰

A stable and serene relationship with God and others is only achieved on the basis of truth. True happiness, writes Saint Augustine, both here on earth and in heaven, is *gaudium de veritate*, joy in discovering and communicating the truth.³¹ To walk in the truth is much more than knowing a set of facts. The Hebrew term *'emet* denotes both “truth” and “fidelity.” A sincere person is faithful, and whoever wishes to be faithful loves the truth. “Abounding in ‘faithfulness’: this is the final word of God’s revelation to Moses. God’s faithfulness never fails, because the Lord is the guardian who, as the Psalm says, never slumbers but keeps constant vigil over us in order to lead us to life: *May he not suffer your foot to slip; may he slumber not who guards you: Indeed he neither slumbers nor sleeps, the guardian of Israel.... The Lord will guard you from all evil; he will guard your life. The Lord will guard your coming and your going, both now and forever (Ps 121[120]:3-4, 7-8).*”³²

In summary, in the Old Testament divine mercy is the tender, maternal welcome that the Lord offers to those who admit the truth of their situation, their weaknesses, errors, sins and infidelities. God not only frees them from the burden weighing them down, but also heals and restores them to the dignity of his children.

The face of the Father’s mercy

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.*³³ These ardent words of the Apostle whom Jesus loved retain all the force with which they were written. In Jesus, John saw and touched the love of God, and all of us Christians can also do so, so *that our joy may be complete.*³⁴ Christ “is divine mercy in person: encountering Christ means encountering God’s mercy.”³⁵ Saint Josemaria invited us not to tire of savoring “the flavor of those moving scenes where the Master performs works that are both divine and human, and tells us, with human and divine touches, the wonderful story of his pardon for us and his enduring Love for his children.”³⁶

Christ is the Good Samaritan,³⁷ who never ignores those suffering any spiritual or material need, but rather is moved to pity and puts a remedy to their misfortune. “God gets involved with our misery, he draws close to our wounds and he heals them with his hands; he became man in order to have hands with which to heal us. Jesus’ work is personal: one man committed the sin, one Man came to heal it.”³⁸ Our Lord’s whole life is filled with works of mercy. He forgives the

²⁹ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 192.

³⁰ *Is* 1:18.

³¹ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 23, 33.

³² Pope Francis, Audience, 13 January 2016.

³³ *I Jn* 1:1.

³⁴ *I Jn* 1:4.

³⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, Homily, Mass for Election of a Pope, 18 April 2005.

³⁶ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 216.

³⁷ Cf. *Lk* 10:33-35.

³⁸ Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 22 October 2013.

sins of the paralytic who is lowered on his stretcher from the roof of the house where he is staying;³⁹ he raises up and restores to his mother the only son of the widow at Naim;⁴⁰ he miraculously feeds the hungry crowds that follow him.⁴¹ “What moved Jesus in all of these situations was nothing other than mercy, with which he read the hearts of those he encountered and responded to their deepest need.”⁴²

Our Lord’s unconditional love reaches its maximum expression in his Passion. There all is forgiveness for men, patience with our sins, words showing no sign of bitterness. Nailed to the wood, he is moved by a thief’s sincere confession: *We indeed [are under the sentence of condemnation] justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; and he asks Jesus: remember me when you come into your kingdom.*⁴³ Jesus responds immediately with a perfect expression of mercy. Jesus accepts the petition made by the thief, who is in need of love and admits the evil in his life in all simplicity; he forgives him and opens to him the door into Heaven. *Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*⁴⁴ Our Lord’s reply shows us that he had been awaiting that moment, as he awaits each one of us, not once but many times. “Jesus received sinners with kindness. If we think in a human way, the sinner would be an enemy of Jesus, an enemy of God. But he approached them with kindness; he loved them and changed their hearts.”⁴⁵

At the foot of the Cross stood our Lady. Trusting in her intercession, we approach God with words our Father heard in a divine inspiration: *Adeamus cum fiducia ad thronum gloriae ut misericordiam consequamur;*⁴⁶ let us draw near with confidence to the throne of glory, that we may obtain mercy.

³⁹ Cf. *Mk* 2:3-12.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Lk* 7: 11-15.

⁴¹ Cf. *Mt* 14:13-21; 15:32-39.

⁴² Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, no. 8.

⁴³ *Lk* 23:41-42.

⁴⁴ *Lk* 23:43.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, Audience, 20 February 2016.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Heb* 4:16.