

2nd Sunday of Easter (B)  
(Acts 4:32-35 / John 20:19-31)  
12.04.2015  
*Divine Mercy*

For a Frenchman, it is always pleasant to realise that the English language has been enhanced and enriched by French words. On this day which has come to be called Mercy Sunday, we can rejoice in the gift of the Old French word *merci* which originally meant *pity*, and which has given the English word *mercy*.

Mercy is an essential word in our Christian tradition. And yet in our 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is a word which seems outdated and irrelevant. It sounds a bit pious and useless, it can describe either a kind of paternalistic kindness or a noncommittal generosity.

In the Bible, divine mercy is about unbounded generosity and strong commitment, it is about tenderness and fidelity. God created the world out of mercy and committed himself to his creation in an eternal covenant. God never ceases to be present to his creation and this is his way of being merciful.

Therefore to be merciful is not just about accomplishing acts of mercy from time to time, it is about remaining committed to sustain, encourage, and support any person who is in need of mercy. The Hebrew word for *mercy* is the word used for the womb of a mother. This explains why we read in Isaiah: “Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (49:14-15).

In Jesus Christ, we see how God’s mercy does not depend on us but on him. We may be sinners, we may fall and get it wrong and yet God remains full of mercy in our regard. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ and his promise to be “with us always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20) is a sure sign of his mercy towards us, poor and weak as we may be.

It has already been said many times from this pulpit and yet it is most appropriate to repeat it once again today: we do not believe in a God who is far away from us, a God who is only remotely connected to us. Because God is mercy, he is not the unmoved mover of the Greek philosophy, he is not an emotionally frozen divinity seated on a throne on high, but he is the caring, loving Father of Jesus Christ and he is our Father too. To dare to speak about divine mercy is to acknowledge that our God knows our pains and our joys, our hopes and our disappointments, he feels what we feel. For God, and for us, to be merciful implies that we are open, vulnerable, willing to take risks and able to bear the hurt this may well involve.

Maybe a way to explain why we often turn our God into a frozen divinity is that we are afraid, or reluctant, to be open, vulnerable, and to take the same risks that God takes.

Let us not be misled, God’s strength is his mercy. It is clear that it requires more strength to be open, vulnerable, to take risks and to bear the hurt than to become a stone, stuck in the mud or enclosed in an ivory tower. It requires more strength to allow oneself to be touched than to keep everybody at a distance.

Very often mercy is considered as a sign of weakness while in fact, in God, mercy is powerful. St Catherine of Siena, the Dominican Doctor of the Church, boldly declares: “O unspeakable mercy! (...) What mercy comes forth from your Godhead, eternal Father, to rule the whole world with your power! By your mercy we were created. And by your mercy we were created anew in your Son’s blood. It is your mercy that preserves us. (...) Who was conquered? Death! And how? By your mercy!” (*The Dialogue* 30).

Yes mercy was able to conquer death and it is life-giving. Mercy is not complacent, dull or passive but active, fruitful and a power for change and renewal.

It is interesting to note that under the communist regime in Russia the word *mercy* was banned from the official dictionary. The explanation is simple: it was argued that mercy is a capitalist concept which describes a system in which rich people help poor people to survive without helping them to change anything to their situation.

Unfortunately this definition is not completely wrong. Sometimes our acts of mercy are more a way for us to appease our consciences and to maintain the status quo than a way of participating in the building of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and peace.

St John Paul II reminded us that “mercy is an indispensable element for shaping mutual relationship between people, in a spirit of deepest respect for what is human”. He believed that “society can become ever more human if we introduce into the manysided setting of interpersonal and social relationships, not merely justice, but also that ‘merciful love’ which constitutes the messianic message of the Gospel” (*Dives* 14, p. 72-73).

Here at the monastery, during our Sunday Eucharistic celebration three times we ask the Lord for mercy: first at the beginning in Greek with the *Kyrie eleison*, then in Latin in the *Gloria* and with the *Agnus Dei*.

If we ask with such insistence, it is because we know that we need to be filled with God’s mercy. If we want to be genuine apostles of divine mercy, we have to experience it first in our own lives as a gracious gift of God.

Speaking to God, St Catherine of Siena exclaimed: “Your mercy is everywhere. O mad lover!” (*The Dialogue* 30). With the eyes of our hearts may we see God’s mercy at work everywhere and, by words and deeds, may we reflect it in our families and communities and in all our relationships.