

The Year of Mercy comes to a close with this Feast of Christ the King. Happily the mercy of God does not close down, but remains freely available in the Sacraments, and especially here in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Throughout this year of Mercy we have listened to the Gospel of Luke. It is the most appropriate of the Gospels as Luke makes mercy a significant emphasis of Jesus' ministry from its beginning; and he concludes Jesus life and work with a final, climactic gesture of forgiveness.

Jesus, in Luke's telling of the story, comes into the world to find the world has no place for him in human company. His bed is a feeding trough for the animals. It is an initial rejection which anticipates many more to come. The biblically literate would be quick to think of the verse from the prophet Isaiah, 'The ox knows its maker and the donkey its master's crib but Israel does not know me, my people do not understand [says the Lord]' (Is. 1,3). His first visitors are from the disreputable ranks of shepherds, shameful creatures, not to be trusted so far as you could throw them.

There will be some who will welcome him – the aged Simeon who recognises the hope of the world, even as he sees his own welcome departure approaching; and the slightly mad Anna who, I suspect, sees a Messiah in every baby she glimpses.

When Jesus ministry begins he starts from his home town and the theme of rejection returns. The townsfolk, his relatives, take offence at him and his 'words of mercy'. He announces his manifesto, written for him by Isaiah, the prophet of the Exile, "I come to bring Good News to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind, to announce a year of God' favour". That means a Jubilee, when slaves are released, land is returned to its former owners. Jesus stops short and does not speak the conclusion of Isaiah's remarks. He does not announce 'the coming vengeance of our God'. The heavily taxed folk of obscure Nazara would like to see a bit of God's vengeance; divine retribution for their enemies. Like their ancient neighbour of Galilee, Jonah, they resent the idea of mercy without punishment. They want God to blast the unrighteous. If all Jesus has to offer are gracious words, they can do without him, thank you.

I think Luke is telling us of a frequent response to Jesus' words. Here at the start he is telling us about a recurring pattern. Jesus comes close to death many times before Calvary. People do not like mercy when they are in a mood for vengeance. Look at the USA today; look at our streets post-Brexit referendum. Hatred for those who are different and whom we are quick to accuse of taking things we think should be ours. Luke has a contemporary tone to his ancient Gospel.

Luke repeats his message of mercy through stories of Jesus' actions – his raising to life the son of the widow of Nain, the healing of ten lepers, the affirmation to the woman who drenched his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair; and his parables, especially the story of the man with two wayward sons and the Good Samaritan. In the latter he describes the compassion of an outsider who will risk his own life for someone who will not be grateful for his kindness. This is a story to enrage even his supporters; a tale that is comprehensible only from the other side of his death and Resurrection, when we have seen the full extent of his love.

Luke tells a wonderful tale of mercy as Jesus is dying which resonates with the message of Nazara. There Jesus announced he would bring Good News to the poor; and freedom for captives. There can be no one poorer than a naked man hanging in extreme pain, enduring a prolonged dying, with no hope for release. There can be no better news than the promise of certain salvation when the torture eventually ceases. The man, a self-confessed criminal, has been in prison. Now he hears of ultimate and heavenly freedom.

Jesus, whose first companions were disreputable, shameful shepherds, has criminals for his final colleagues; in between he sought out the marginals, those at the edge of society who were ever likely to fall, or be pushed, off the edge - sinners, tax gatherers, ladies of the night. Consistent in his company, he persists in his acts and words of mercy.

Today we celebrate the kingship of Christ. A kingship unconnected to palaces, or power, or pomp, or pageant. A kingship with no connection to royal things: Jesus' kingship means poverty, homelessness, rejection and an agonised death. We are invited to see the glory in the abasement, and imitate the humility. When God came among us he came as the God who is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy. Mercy, in Latin *miser cordia*, means a heart for the poor; and compassion is suffering with those who are in need of mercy. Mercy and compassion reveal the kingship of Christ crucified.