

HIS MERCY ENDURES FOR EVER

By LADISLAS ÖRSY

WE READ in the gospel of Matthew that the humanity of Jesus was a stumbling block to his contemporaries, especially in his own country. They could not quite deny that his teaching was not like any other they had ever heard, but they asked, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?' The lofty gift of wise words and mighty deeds conflicted, in their minds, with the down-to-earth fact that he was 'the carpenter's son', that his mother Mary and all his family relations were well known in the region (cf Mt 14,53-58). His knowledge and his power seemed to come from above, but he was born, clearly, into an ordinary family. The two did not go together!

The stumbling block today for our contemporaries who watch the pilgrim Church on the scene of history is a similar one. They perceive wisdom in its teaching and they are not indifferent to the mighty works that nearly two thousand years of its history continue to display. But divine qualities do not harmonize well with a community so obviously full of all sorts of serious shortcomings and human limitations. Again, there is a contrast, nay, a clear incompatibility between gifts from above and the community from below. The two do not seem to go together!

Really, we Christians are to blame for such a lack of understanding. For long we preached, in good times and bad, about the divine gifts in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Of course, it was all true and had to be proclaimed, but it was not the full truth because the divine gifts are received in an earthen vessel, fragile and not always the most beautiful. Those who preached the gifts forgot to tell about the vessel. Those who see the vessel cannot quite believe the gifts.

The truth is that the rich gifts from above and the poor containers from below can and do exist together. Even the divinity of the Son of God was hidden behind the humanity of the son of Mary. He spoke wisdom with a galilean accent. His mighty works were accompanied by familiar gestures. It was not all that easy for the simple folk

around him to grasp the mystery and to bring and to hold the contrasts together.

If anything, it is even more difficult to grasp the contrasts in the christian community. It has received gifts from above; indeed, it has become the trustee of the Word of God for all ages to come. It is in possession of so many signs of God's sanctifying work in human history. But the members of the community are all known around, and each of them is not without human limitations; each of them is capable of turning away from what is right and doing what is wrong. Many of them have done precisely that. There is the contrast. The difficulty in understanding follows. How can this community be the gathering, that is the Church, of the chosen children of God?

If there is an urgent need now in christian preaching, it is the need to proclaim, in measured, humble but true words, the humanity of the Church, so that all, inside and outside of the Church, should know that these gifts exist in the midst of a community marked by the limitations of our humanity.

This may lead to a different understanding of the Church from what we are accustomed to, but, since it is closer to the full truth, it will also be a much healthier one. The Church will not be looked on as the society of a privileged élite, but as a simple community called to proclaim God's mercy.

Thus, the christian Church itself, as it is, with gifts from above and limitations from below, should be a sign lifted high up among the nations that God is indeed compassionate and merciful. He has not disdained to manifest himself through a community of human persons who aspire to great heights but must walk in the dust of the earth. This community — a living paradox as it is! — has the task of announcing that God's mercy endures forever. Such a proclamation cannot be in mere words alone, it must be manifested in deeds as well. And those deeds cannot be just occasional events. The very life of the Church should be such that mercy is present in all its actions. That is, the Church itself should be like God's mercy incarnate in us as far as this is possible. Every fibre of its social body should be penetrated by an attitude of mercy. As far as it is not, the community is still falling short of the ideal that it professes. But the community cannot be 'the merciful one' unless the individual persons themselves learn to be merciful. And how can a person learn to be merciful?

Who, then, we should ask, is a person with mercy in his heart? The answer is that he is the person who has learned, in his mind and

heart, to comprehend the thoughts of God and to follow the ways of God — someone who has become a friend of God as Abraham did (cf Gen 18,17ff). The surprising qualities of divine mercy cannot be learned from any human being. In fact, it is a temptation to interpret God's mercy according to human measures.

There is no better way of learning about the thoughts and ways of God than by meditating on those images of the gospel where mercy is revealed. We cannot give any comprehensive list of them, but let us mention just a few.

There is the image of the father whose youngest son asked for the share of property that should fall to him and then gathered all that he had and took his journey into a far country. The father did not hold him back, he let him go — but waited for his return. Did the father go out in the evening to scan the horizon, asking, 'Is he coming today?' It seems so because when the son was coming, the father noticed him from a distance and ran and embraced him and kissed him. There were no formalities in receiving him back as there must have been when the son asked for his share of the inheritance at the time of his departure. There was only celebration and merriment. There is mercy in the image of this father's unconditional, boundless leaning down to the humbled son and lifting him up.

Then, there is the other image of the Son, sent by the Father, who came to gather the scattered children of Israel. As he set out on his ministry, he directed his way toward those who were the farthest away and needed to be brought back, or to those who were sick and were in need of medicine. Thus, he went to meet the tax collectors and the prostitutes and had his meal with them. There is divine mercy again. But, perhaps the most astounding revelation of mercy is in the manifestations of the Risen One. He was put to death and then he came to bring life to all those who were sitting in the shadow of death. He remained faithful to them.

No definition of mercy emerges from the contemplation of these images, rather a comprehension of mercy which is beyond all human understanding. God's mercy is an aspect of his love for his whole creation, in particular of his love for the work of his hands, for men and women.

Once the members of the Church know that they are what they are because our God is compassionate and merciful, their understanding will have its impact on the attitude of the whole community. Indeed, the Church as a whole should keep always in mind its own humble origins. Truly, the members have been called

and sanctified by the Spirit. Equally truly, they are weak human beings. Now that they have experienced mercy from God, they should show mercy to their fellow human beings.

And, there is the role of the Church toward the entire human family. Its task is not to condemn what is amiss, but to do what it can to right what is wrong. Such a simple theoretical principle has very far-reaching consequences: it determines the practical attitude of the Church towards the world. At this point it would be easy to point to historical mistakes, to words and deeds that came from Christians, in official positions or not, who forgot about the humble origins of the community, including their own humble beginnings.

There is something else to remember. While the Church has been called to be trustee of the word of God and to preserve it incorrupt, it has not been given the knowledge of the full truth all at once. Rather, it was granted an initial gift which must unfold slowly, step by step, through the centuries, not without much work and toil.

Such an evolutionary nature of the knowledge the Church possesses means that while the community is steadily in possession of some fundamental truths, it must also continuously progress toward the understanding of the fuller truth. It follows that, until the end of all time, the Church must go on searching. In this search the Spirit himself will protect the word — but the same Spirit will also allow human mistakes to be made.

There are practical consequences, again. Whenever we meet Christians, in communion with our Roman Church or not, who are searching for the truth in good faith, compassion postulates that our response should not be in the form of condemnation, but rather in patient help and exchange. In particular, when we meet those whose *communio* with our Church has broken down over many centuries, allowance should be made for different historical evolutions. The insights that the Catholic Church has reached in so many centuries cannot be reached by the others overnight. Vice versa, the legitimate new insights they have reached cannot always be grasped quickly and easily by Catholics. Just how long has it taken for us to appropriate the intense respect for the bible which has existed so strongly among the reformers? It is only recently that their devotion to the word of God has penetrated into the daily life and practice of our community.

It is imperative, therefore, that when we speak about the reunion of Churches, it should be understood that we do not wish for more than what is the absolutely binding doctrine of faith for all

Christians. We should be able to live with a great diversity of theological opinions and with a great deal of variety in liturgical practices.

It follows that, even today, there should be plenty of room for new departures. There the early Church can serve as an inspiration. Right in the first centuries, christian groups sprang up, all being one in faith, hope, and love, and yet organizing their churches and their worship in different ways. The many oriental churches surviving to this day testify to this great respect of the early Christians for different traditions. Is it too much of a dream to think that eventually there should be Churches on different continents as different among themselves as, let us say, Jerusalem was from Antioch, Antioch from Alexandria, and Alexandria from Rome? Compassion and mercy should lead to diversity.

The understanding of God's mercy should lead the Church also to a better understanding of its own nature and the composition of its members. They are all saints. St Paul was emphatic on that. They are all sinners. We need not go to St Paul to know that much. In the distribution of mercy to sinners, there should be a great generosity. They should feel themselves at home, much as the tax collectors and the prostitutes felt at home with Jesus. There is the power of forgiving sins granted to the Church — a mysterious power to be used not less magnanimously than Jesus himself used his power to forgive the repentant sinners. The gospel model of forgiveness is simplicity itself, and while it is certain that the Church has the power to forgive, it seems equally certain that it has the power to forgive with much greater simplicity than it has been doing in recent centuries. Nothing will be lost by taking inspiration from the gospel model.