

SERMON – BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

Well it's been another week that's added to the general feeling of discombobulation with the news of two of my friends passing away. It all just added to the conversation I had the other day with a friend over cheese, crackers and drinks, who I hadn't seen for quite a while. I asked them "so how are you doing." And with an air of weary resignation, they said... "oh you know, it's all just wearing a bit thin really and it just leaves me with a sense of sadness and feeling a bit down".

And I thought, that's a good phrase to capture things really. On so many different levels, in so many different ways, haven't we all felt things wearing a bit thin?

I was reflecting on all of this yesterday, and some words from a beautiful song by Paul Simon came to mind. "**I don't know a soul who's not been battered, I don't have a friend who feels at ease**". So I revisited the song through a live version from 1975 on the Michael Parkinson show and I realised I actually watched on the night.

As I listened again, I felt 2 things. (1) I was entranced by the beauty of the melody (which is a Bach tune) and (2) I was struck by just how much the lyrics capture the zeitgeist/the spirit of our times.

So I thought let's start with this today. One of my spiritual disciplines throughout this whole journey has been to feed my soul with that which is beautiful and inspiring. Which of these words resonate most for you I wonder?

PAUL SIMON VIDEO <https://youtu.be/1gWqfhKO77U>

As I say, words that capture so much of the spirit of these times for so many. But thankfully and mercifully, on the Covid front here in Aotearoa maybe, just maybe we are beginning to emerge from what has felt like a very long and at times, dark tunnel. But as I touched on 2 weeks ago, a conversation with my eldest daughter in the UK, just confirmed something I firmly believe to be true.



That we will need to recognise that there is a different kind of journey ahead and we need to acknowledge this. **It's what I call the journey of the aftermath.** I've seen it

and experienced it in many different forms throughout my life. As I'm sure you have too.

All of us have had enormous challenges, individually and collectively. All of us have felt our soul being battered. And all of us will have picked up a few psychological, spiritual, and relational bruises along the way.

- Some of us will recognise that the spirit of anxiety has a grip on us that we're finding hard to shake.
- Some of us will have recognised that our hearts and spirit have at times hardened towards someone whose opinions and perspectives around all the thorny issues involved in this journey, have differed from ours?
- Some of us will recognise that we carry feelings of hurt and even anger, that's eaten away at our spirit of mercy. Or even a mixture of all three.

So we should acknowledge the need to tend to our bruises. The need to 'let go' of some of these hurts. The need to reclaim our inner peace. The need for healing. Today is about encouragement for this journey.

Its why today's Beatitude from Jesus Christ on the call for the spirit of mercy, is so profoundly central and significant for this journey that lies ahead. For us as a St George's community our desire is to make mercy central to everything we say and do. To help and encourage each other through this journey ahead.

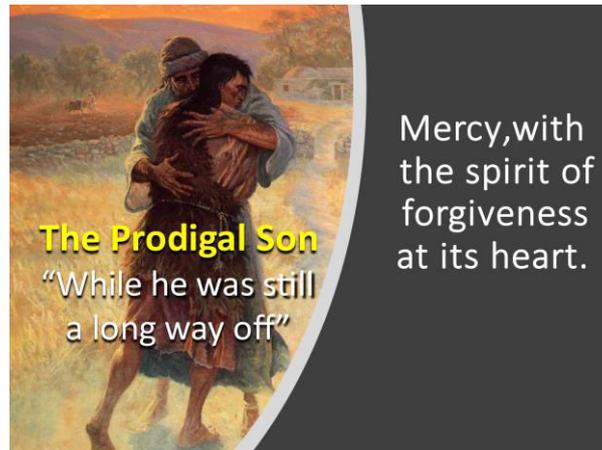
So let's begin our deeper dive into today's Beatitude ... "Blessed are those, who show mercy because they shall receive mercy. KNOW mercy." And let's begin with the core fundamental context of why Jesus makes mercy a kingdom beatitude imperative.

THE CENTRALITY OF MERCY IN ALL OF HOLY SCRIPTURE.

In the O/T the word for mercy is *chesedh* and its one of **the** great words of the Old Testament. It's used over 150 times and pretty much always it's about the great loving mercy of God. God's constant, faithful, all-encompassing loving mercy. One the most repeated phrases in scripture is that this steadfast love and mercy of God endures... **Forever.**

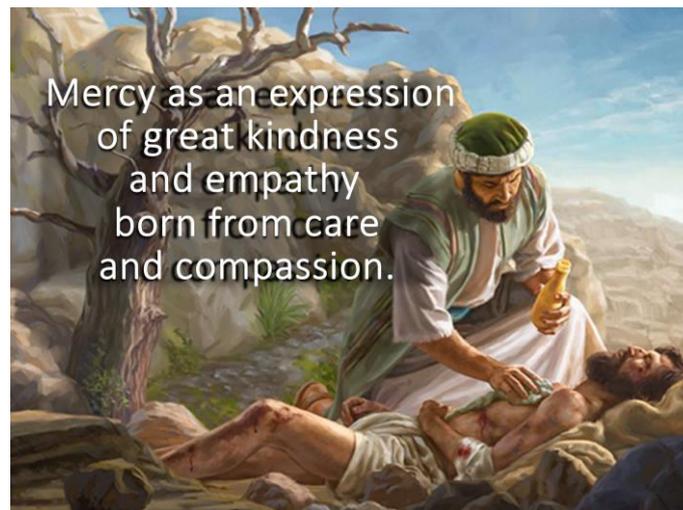
And the O/T prophet Micah reveals just how much God wants us to reciprocate the mercy that's so freely given to us. **"And what does the Lord require of you O human, that you act justly, love mercy and walk humbly before your God."**

In the New Testament the Hebrew 'chesedh' become mostly the Greek 'eleos' ... and in two of His most well-known and well-loved parables Jesus give us the 2 essential characteristics, the flavours to this everlasting mercy.



Firstly, Mercy with the spirit of forgiveness at its heart.

Someone does something that calls for a consequence and punishment, but they are shown compassionate mercy. The parable of *The Prodigal Son* is all about this kind of radical mercy of God. What’s often missed in the Prodigal son, is that when the shamed Son decides to return with his tail between his legs... he doesn’t even have to approach His father and beg for mercy, or even reason for mercy. Because while still a long way off, the Father runs, to greet the Son and embraces him with the kiss of radical mercy.



But mercy is also an expression of great kindness and empathy born from care and compassion.

Someone is in a desperate situation. And someone comes along and shows them extreme kindness with no expectation of reward. The parable of *The Good Samaritan* is all about this characteristic of radical mercy.

- It’s the beautiful healing spirit of mercy that erases all the usual human boundaries of race and religion.
- It’s the beautiful healing spirit of mercy that dismantles all the usual dividing walls of hostility that we so love to build and defend with our hardened hearts.

- It's the beautiful healing spirit of mercy, that is never conditional, tribal or transactional.

Think about it. What's at the very heart of the greatest judgement parable in all Holy Scripture. The Sheep and the Goats? This is where Jesus spells out to all his followers for all time, **that wherever and whenever WE show mercy to the least of OUR brothers and sisters... WE are showing mercy to Christ.**

We should remember all these parables from Jesus are mostly about what the Beatitudes look like lived out in real life examples. And what they all reveal, is that Kingdom mercy is never conditional, it's never tribal, and it's never transactional.

So let's just take a moment to pause and reflect.

How does this radical mercy both challenge and encourage you and I in our own journey's? Is there any part of your heart or my heart where the spirit of mercy has become conditional, tribal or transactional?

All of this brings me to a really important context of scripture that I've only recently become aware of. But I've found this incredibly helpful in getting a deeper grasp of ALL the Beatitudes. Because it's all about having a fuller context to meaning of the word blessed.

Blessed is most often translated in scripture and understood as "happy" or even blissful. **But here's another lens that scholars offer, which is to look through the lens of Psalm 1.**

1 Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked, but instead delights and meditates in the law of the Lord. One Hebrew translation for Blessing is 'a-shar' meaning "to find the right road". So Psalm 1 is saying, Blessed (finding the right road) are those who don't walk in the ways of the wicked but delights in God's law.

Now read all the Beatitudes seen through this lens and context of Psalm 1.

- You have found the right road when you recognise your poverty of need because with less room for you there's more room for God.
- You have found the right road when you mourn about the worlds suffering because now you care about what God cares about.
- You have found the right road when you approach life with a meek, gentle and humble spirit because now you know the servant heart of Christ.
- You have found the right road when you develop an appetite for all that is right and just – AND when you walk the way of the peacemaker.

WHY? Because this is what it looks like to live under the rule and reign of God's way. In the here and now and the promise of the age to come.

SO you and I are finding the right road, when we show the gift of mercy to others that we have received ourselves.

And we all know the truth of this in the reality of life. We all know that when the spirit of mercy has left the building, the essence of our humanity has left the building too. Show me a people, be it a family, a workspace, an institution, a church, a nation, a world... where the see spirit of mercy has been lost, and I'll show you a people who have lost their way.

This was the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees and religious people. **Mathew 23: 23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. 24 You blind guides!**

Their mercy had become so conditional, so tribal, so transactional, they'd lost sight of the divine fingerprint in all people. And in doing so lost sight of themselves and God.

I WANT TO BEGIN TO CONCLUDE WITH AN ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE JOURNEY AHEAD. The journey of the aftermath.

I said at the beginning that we should acknowledge the need to tend to our psychological, spiritual and relational bruises.

We should acknowledge the need to 'let go' of some of our hurts.

We should acknowledge the need to reclaim our inner peace and find healing.

And the spirit of mercy will be key to this healing.

So, I'll finish with a final encouragement for this journey.

When we hear these words... **"Blessed are those who are merciful for they shall receive mercy"**, again I'm guessing most of us read this as... **"blessed are those who are merciful to OTHERS.** And of course, this is our Christian calling.

But maybe every now and then we also need to remember to show a little mercy to ourselves? Receive God's tender mercy for our own tender bruises.

I know that I can be very hard on myself and I'm sure you do this to yourself too.

We can all beat ourselves up with feelings of being not good enough, not worthy enough, not measuring up enough, and it's pretty diminishing. **But if we have no mercy for ourselves, we will find it very hard to feel mercy for anyone else.**

Christ on the Cross with arms outstretched, is Gods embrace of mercy to the world and all creation. **"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"** is mercy personified. Which means that the Church was birthed from the womb of Gods mercy. We love because God first loves us.

So our prayer for all our ST George's community in the journey ahead, is that together we journey this 'right road' of the healing spirit of mercy for ourselves and for others.

AS MUSIC PLAYS TIME FOR REFLECTION - THEN THESE WORDS OF PRAYER.

So loving God, as we all come forward today for our sacred time of Holy Communion let your faithful mercy bring healing and peace into our anxieties. Let Your tender mercies heal our tender bruises and lingering hurts. Let your gentle mercy soften our resentments and anger. And wherever our mercy may be conditional, tribal and transactional, let the mercy of Christ, arms outstretched on the Cross, stretch all of our capacity to know and show the mercy of Christ.