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Mercy in the Year of Matthew

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The Extraordinary Year of Mercy has ended. The convergence of its celebration and Luke’s Gospel of ‘mercy from on high’ in the course of the Sunday Lectionary was providential. Passages like the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus*, parables like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, the portrait of Jesus as the prophet of God’s compassion complemented the continual proclamation and practice of Pope Francis which called members of the church to ‘be merciful just as your Father is merciful’ (6:36). How to continue this call in the Year of Matthew (A) is both an invitation and a challenge for preachers and pastors. Interestingly, in *Misericordiae Vultus* – The Face of Mercy – the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee of Mercy there are twice as many references to Matthew as there are to Luke.

The move from Luke to Matthew means a change of controlling metaphors, from the medical to the educational. Teaching is the focus of Matthew’s message, finishing with the missionary commandment to the eleven (and the church) to ‘make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you’ (Matt 28:20). Five discourses by Jesus divide and dominate the pages of this Gospel and tower like peaks over the Matthean landscape. The Sermon on the Mount is more than three times as long as Luke’s parallel on the plain and it sets out what Bernard Häring stated are the ‘goal commandments’ of the Christian life. The call to ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ is the culmination of the Antitheses (‘You have heard that it was said ... But I say to you’) which ask their hearers to act so ‘that you may be children of your Father in heaven’ (5:45). Donald Nicholl describes the challenge this contains in uncompromising terms: ‘For there is no evading the truth that to be a disciple of Jesus is the most demanding call that any human being can receive, and Matthew’s Gospel is especially harsh in the language that it uses to drive home the total nature of those demands’.¹ The double reference to demand here discloses, as

1 ‘Discipline for a New Community – the Gospel according to St Matthew’, in ed. Ronan Drury, *The New Testament as Personal Reading* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1983), 28-41, here 36.

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MERCY IN THE YEAR OF MATTHEW

Nicholl declares, that ‘inexorably Matthew drives us to examine ourselves unsparingly and to put into practice every jot and tittle of Jesus’ teaching’.²

THE BEATITUDE OF MERCY

Reference to the harsh language of Matthew raises the question of the relation between Jesus’ teaching and mercy in this Gospel. Thankfully this teaching is tempered by mercy or, in other terms, there is teaching about mercy. Herman Hendrickx’s assertion that ‘in fact, we may say that the one major command running through Matthew’s gospel is that of mercy’³ raises the ante in reappraising the evangelist’s moral teaching, especially in relation to the role of mercy as foundational for the life of discipleship. Mercy appears first in Matthew as the fifth Beatitude (there is no parallel in Luke): ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’ (5:7). If identified as just one of the Beatitudes there is a danger of misplacing mercy. The Beatitudes are not offered in isolation, as if they are individual options, operating independently. Poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, making peace, being merciful, martyrdom make up a Gospel *gestalt* where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Viewing the Beatitudes as Gospel virtues offers a vision of the goal of the Christian life which is global rather than piecemeal and goes with the call to be (come) perfect.

This Beatitude does not bestow mercy as an achievement, as somehow earned through efforts, the end state of perfectionism. The receiving of mercy is not a reward but a blessing bestowed. The merciful obtain mercy because they are open to it. As Hendrickx notes, ‘The second half of this beatitude – The merciful “shall obtain mercy”, literally “shall be shown (or given mercy) mercy” – means that before God the disciple who practised mercy in a very special way benefit of the divine mercy which he too, as any person, will need’.⁴ The morality of this (and all the Beatitudes) is not based on merit but on grace. Matthew will bring out this teaching many times in his Gospel.

‘I DESIRE MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE’

The first reference to this quote from *Hosea* comes as a riposte to the begrudgery of the Pharisees who berated the disciples of Jesus for his table-fellowship with tax-collectors and sinners. Jesus’ rabbinic response reminds them of the relative weight of worship against witness to God’s mercy: ‘Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but

2 Ibid., 41.

3 *Sermon on the Mount* (Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1979), 30.

4 Ibid., 31.

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sinner's' (9:13). Matthew is the only one of the Synoptics to include the line from the prophet in this passage. In full teaching mode Jesus ticks off the Pharisees for their self-righteousness, telling them to focus instead on the true righteousness that is received in response to his revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven. As Donald Senior remarks, 'Jesus' citation of Hosea 6:6 (to be repeated in 12:7) stifles their murmurs against his ministry by reasserting the primacy of compassion over the less important stipulations of the Law (the connotation of "sacrifice", in this context)⁵. The ramifications of this reach far beyond his relations with the Scribes and Pharisees to any form of rigorism and reiterates the medicinal reaching out referred to by Jesus: 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick' (12:12). This finds a ready echo in Pope Francis' preferred image of the Church as a 'field hospital' and reinforces its mission of mercy to all who have need of it:

It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person to find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an 'unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy'. No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I am speaking not only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves.⁶

Jesus' reiteration of the absoluteness of mercy is reinforced by the reference to tax-collectors as this episode comes immediately after his encounter with one of them: 'He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me". And he got up and followed him' (9:9). Pope Francis draws out the message of this encounter expressed in a single verse by the evangelist:

The calling of Matthew is also presented within the context of mercy. Passing by the tax collector's booth, Jesus looked intently at Matthew. It was a look full of mercy that forgave the sin of that man, a sinner and a tax collector, whom Jesus chose – against the hesitation of the disciples – to become one of the Twelve. Saint Bede the Venerable, commenting upon this Gospel passage, wrote that Jesus looked upon Matthew with merciful love and chose him: *miserando atque eligendo*. This expression impressed me so much that I chose it for my episcopal motto.⁷

MEASURING MERCY

In response to Peter's question about how many times he should

5 *Invitation to Matthew* (New York: Image Books, 1977), 96.

6 *Amoris Laetitia – The Joy of Love* (Dublin: Veritas, 2016), par.297.

7 *Misericordiae Vultus* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015), par. 9.

forgive a fellow member of the church, Jesus answers with a multiplier – ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’ (18:22) – adding a parable found only in Matthew. A king draws up an account with one of his slaves who is not able to settle his account. With the prospect of his family and possessions being sold the slave falls on his knees before the king and pleads for more time to arrange payment, receiving a write off of all that he owes: ‘And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt’ (18:27). ‘Pity’ is, in the opinion of scholars, a weak rendering of the original which means that the king is moved in the very depths of his being to show mercy. Owed by a fellow slave what Daniel J. Harrington calls in comparison ‘a piddling sum’⁸, this man does not show any restraint, never mind remission of debt. Fuelled by rage rather than reconciliation he gives vent to fury in forgetting the forgiveness he received in rejecting a plea for patience similar to the one he had himself made. Not counting the compassion conferred upon himself, he condemns his fellow servant to jail. Complained to the king he receives the rebuke ‘Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ and is handed over ‘to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt’, an amount which he has no realistic hope of ever amassing. Shown to be both ungrateful and unmerciful, understandably Pope Francis refers to him as a ‘ruthless servant’.⁹ In his ironically (in this case) *Lifting the Burden* Brendan Byrne declares the refusal to delay his fellow servant’s debt a ‘monstrosity’ and delivers a damning judgement: ‘The unforgiving servant, whose entire existence has been restored through an overwhelming triumph of mercy over justice, now in a case against himself that a little mercy would swiftly resolve, withdraws from the sphere of mercy and reverts, with brutal effect, to a narrow application of justice’.¹⁰ Matthew applies the parable in asserting that this servant’s fate will be the same for ‘every one of you, if you not forgive your brother or sister from the heart’ (18:35). Klyne R. Snodgrass comments that ‘the concern of the parable is God’s forgiveness and the seriousness of failing to mirror God’s mercy ... [for] forgiveness not shown is forgiveness not known’.¹¹

‘HAVE MERCY ON US’

There are two stories of the healing of two blind men in Matthew. The first is found in chapter nine and reinforces the references to

8 *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 270.

9 *Misericordiae Vultus*, par. 9.

10 *Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 144.

11 *Stories with Intent – A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2008), 75.

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mercy above, culminating in the comment about Jesus' ministry that 'when he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9:36).

This story reinforces the requirement of faith requested by Jesus for the performance of a miracle. The second is situated in chapter twenty as Jesus is reported leaving Jericho and heading for Jerusalem. On this occasion the two blind men reject the reproach of the crowd to remain silent and repeat their plea even more loudly, 'Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!' (20:31). Replying to their request to restore their sight, 'moved with compassion Jesus touched their eyes [and] immediately they regained their sight' (20: 34).

The repetition of this miracle here has three purposes. Firstly, it allows the evangelist to re-emphasise the healing compassion of Jesus in the course of his ministry. Jesus' message of mercy is mirrored in his miracles. Secondly, located immediately after the story of the mother of the two sons of Zebedee making her case for major ministries in the new empire Jesus is presumed to be establishing, it exemplifies the true nature of discipleship and dependency on what God is doing in and through Jesus. Thirdly, the calling out of the two blind men is more than an intercession, a confession of Jesus as the Christ of God. As Barbara Reid comments, 'These two who [now] see and follow model the response needed of disciples as Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem as Son of David to begin the ordeal that will culminate in his reign with God'.¹² Matthew's message through telling these miracles is that Jesus, as the exalted Messiah, extends God's mission of mercy on earth through the church.

MESSIANIC MERCY

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' These feel like lines from Luke yet are remarkably found only in Matthew (11:28 - 30). This invitation is issued through his preferred image of Jesus, the teacher. Jesus' teaching is rooted in and revelatory of his relation to God, announced here as 'my Father': 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (11:27). This absolute announcement, 'so Johannine in

¹² *The Gospel according to Matthew*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 104.

tone'¹³, attests the identity of Jesus as the Son who has been given 'all things' and therefore is able to speak and act authoritatively for God. The wisdom that Jesus preaches and personifies is the mercy of God. He alone can reveal and represent this mercy fully because as Son he resembles the Father. The repetition of the offer of rest reinforces the promise of peace and the closest spiritual parallel in scripture is the consoling line of Jesus in the Gospel of John: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid' (14:27).

This invitation seems to include a catch involving the carrying of a yoke and the bearing of a burden. While 'easy yoke' and 'light burden' seem to be contradictions in terms, this is offset by Jesus owning them. Ben Witherington III states that 'such yokes are bearable for disciples of Jesus because he is both gentle and humble of heart'.¹⁴ The same word is used to describe both the Beatitude of meekness (5: 5) and the gentleness of the Messiah. In his aptly (in this case) *Lifting the Burden* Byrne brings out the moral-spiritual meaning of this remarkable passage:

What must be insisted upon is the strong sense of Jesus' personal presence that radiates from the text; "Come to me ..."; "I will give you rest"; "my yoke ..."; "my burden ...". The quality of "ease" and the "lightness" cannot consist in a lesser level of virtue or ethical demand. It must have something to do with the sense that all fulfilment in practice is preceded and facilitated by an intense relationship with Jesus and a sense of being grasped by his love. His claim to be "gentle and humble of heart" is ultimately a claim to personal attractiveness and an invitation to enter into an exchange of love. Such love, which is ultimately an extension of the love of the Father (v.27), is what can make even the most difficult requirements "easy" and "light".¹⁵

Matthew makes use of a passage from Isaiah to indicate the merging of Messianic meekness and mercy in the ministry of Jesus. The context for the fulfilment of this prophecy is the curing and charging of the crowds 'not to make him known' (12:17). In keeping with the missionary thrust of his Gospel Matthew replaces the prophet's references to 'the nations' to 'the Gentiles', making clear that the church must continue the stance and substance of what has been started in Jesus. Jesus' self-description of 'meek

13 Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology* (Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 41.

14 *The Indelible Image – The Theological Thought World of the New Testament, Vol. 1/The Individual Witnesses* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 662.

15 *Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*, 97.

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and humble in heart' dovetails with the description of the servant as one who does not shout and shove so as to make his presence felt. Matthew's use of this quote from Isaiah could be considered a parallel to the passage from the same prophet that Luke employs to express the understanding of Jesus as he undertakes his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth, beginning with the statement 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... (Lk 4:18). Stanley Hauerwas brings out the meaning of the Messianic mandate according to Matthew: 'Yet his fulfilment ... forces Israel to reconsider what kind of Messiah it thought would come, for here is the king who refuses to rule by force, here is the priest who will be sacrificed, and here is the prophet who does not "wrangle or cry aloud". Moreover, his fulfilment of these offices means that hope is brought to the Gentiles, making justice possible'.¹⁶

While Matthew omits the prophecy that 'he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth' (Is 42:4), he includes the promise that 'he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory' (12:20). R.T. France links the practice proposed here with the earlier picture of Jesus:

A reed was used for measuring and for support, so that once its straightness was lost by bending or cracking it was of no further use. A strip of linen cloth used as a lamp wick, if it smokes ... is in danger of going out altogether. Common sense would demand that both be replaced ... The imagery thus describes an extraordinary willingness to encourage damaged or vulnerable people ... The servant will not be quick to condemn or discard ... Here Matthew finds a further portrait of the meek and lowly Jesus who offers a kind yoke and a light burden, the giver of rest to the toiling and heavily loaded.¹⁷

The servant here is similar to the shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep (Lk 15:2-7). These figures show the length to which ministers of the Gospel of mercy are called to go, as Pope Francis states:

It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an 'unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy'. No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Matthew* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 121.

¹⁷ *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Cambridge, U.K., 2007), 472-473.

¹⁸ *Amoris Laetitia – The Joy of Love* (Dublin: Veritas, 2016), par. 297.

WORKS OF MERCY

In the current exhibition at the National Gallery in London entitled '*Beyond Caravaggio*' (due to come to Dublin in February 2017) there is a photograph of Caravaggio's *The Seven Acts of Mercy* which was painted in the church of *Pio Monte della Misericordia* in Naples in 1607. Helen Langdon describes it:

In his altarpiece Caravaggio united the theme of Our Lady of Mercy with the Seven Acts of Mercy. His picture, however, does not show the acts carried out by the deputies [of *Monte della Misericordia*] (no prisoners are freed, nor slaves redeemed), nor does it suggest the young noblemen themselves; Caravaggio sets the scene in a rough Neapolitan street, excluding the world of the wealthy, and returning directly to the Gospel of St Matthew. Here Matthew describes six acts of mercy through which man, at the Last Judgement, may be saved. Matthew does not include burying the dead, but this had become part of the tradition in the medieval period ... This is the dark side of Naples, where beggars huddled in doorways, whose prisons were feared and where the dead lay unburied in the streets. Woven into this evocation of Neapolitan life are the Seven Acts ... In Caravaggio's painting the hope of salvation remains distant, and he suggests fear, flight, the sudden threat of death itself, in scenes so furiously rendered that they evoke the recent dramas of his own life, and perhaps his own need for salvation. At the same time the picture's hectic clamour perfectly conveys contemporary spirituality, for the sense that good works were urgent, that salvation was pressing.¹⁹

In Chapter 25, the so-called Last Judgement scene, Matthew does not mention mercy. This scene, symbolized in the separation of sheep from goats, sees the division of the blessed enjoying eternal life and the accursed experiencing eternal damnation determined in terms of the test of treating others. Thus Karl Rahner asks rhetorically: 'Has there been sufficient reflection on the fact that, according to Jesus' speech on the judgement in Matthew 25, men are judged – it might almost be said 'atheistically' – solely in the light of their attitude to their neighbour?'²⁰ The practice(s) of mercy to the outcast, oppressed and obviously needy in society in this parable is a prelude to the passion of Jesus, pointing out the type of Kingship he proclaims and personifies. Noting the parallel

19 *Caravaggio - A Life* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2000), 329, 330, 332.

20 'Theological Justification of the Church's Development Work' in *Concern for the Church/Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1986, 65-73, here 66-67.

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between these last words in Matthew ‘to his disciples in a lengthy address’ and the Last Supper discourses in John, John P. Meier states that ‘in both places the final message of Jesus is love’.²¹ Jesus exemplifies this love to the end, laying down his life.

There is another notable parallel for Matthew’s Last Judgement: Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan. Here the recipient of help is also anonymous, though innocent and not imprisoned. Treated and taken care of in the terms of judgement identified by Jesus the injured man in the parable is a victim of violence which is at the root of so much injustice and inequality. Bearing the burden of care in this case the Samaritan shows the same compassion that Jesus did for the widow and her dead son at Nain. This allows Jesus to authoritatively assert, in answer to the lawyer’s asking about the identity of the neighbour in need, ‘Go and do likewise’ (Lk: 10:37). Matthew’s missionary church is expected to extend the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This entails working ‘in “the ecumenism of mercy” to help all who suffer or are excluded, and especially today migrants and refugees’.²² Without the works of mercy, corporal and spiritual, we will live, to borrow a half line from Barack Obama on his final visit as President of the United States to Berlin, in ‘a meaner, harsher and more troubled world’.

‘THE LOGIC OF PASTORAL MERCY’

This is the title for the final six paragraphs of Chapter 8 of *The Joy of Love*, ‘Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness’. Balancing the responsibility towards the ideal with a recognition of the imperfect, Pope Francis states that ‘the Church’s pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church’s teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements’.²³ Matthew’s statement about the fulfilment of the law comes immediately after the Beatitudes and the invitation in images of salt/light: ‘For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished’ (5:18).

Interpreted legalistically, that is literally in a so-called letter of the law approach, this runs the risk of both abandoning and alienating people. Adopting such a line would involve an attitude of condemnation which cuts people off from the community, a course of action absolutely rejected by Francis. Such an approach would give the lie to Matthew’s words about the bruised reed/

21 *Matthew* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1980), 306.

22 Marcelo Figueroa, quoted in Gerard O’Connell, ‘The Ecumenical Pope’, *America* (28 November 2016), 24.

23 *Amoris Laetitia – The Joy of Love*, par. 308.

smouldering wick, spelling the end for any stance of pastoral mercy and strategy of gradualism supported by him. While the Holy Year of Mercy may have ended the Church will maintain its mandate by meditating on the Gospel of Matthew and focusing on Francis' words about 'a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality'.²⁴

24 Ibid., par. 312.

Enough. A final challenge to the soul is to discern the excessiveness in our lives – our congenital drive towards acquiring more, often in a mindless kind of greed. Fr Ronald Rolheiser writes: 'When excess enters, enjoyment departs, as does freedom. Compulsion sets in. Now we begin to seek a thing, not because it will bring us joy, but because we are driven to have it. Excess is a substitute for enjoyment.' The story goes that Joseph Heller, author of *Catch 22*, was once told about a fund manager who made more money that very day than he did from all his books combined. Heller replied, 'Then I have something he will never have. Enough.' Spiritual writer Mary Jo Leddy insists that at some point in Lent we must say, mean and live the following; 'It's enough. I have enough. I am enough. Life is enough. With all my heart I thank you.'

– DANIEL O'LEARY, *Treasured and Transformed* (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 57.