

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Amos 7:12-15

Psalm 84

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:7-13

In the responsorial psalm that we heard this morning, there was this marvellous line:

Mercy and faithfulness have met; justice and peace have embraced.

The psalm continued: “Faithfulness shall spring from the earth, and justice look down from heaven.”

So often these virtues are thought of as being opposed to each other – mercy is emphasised and the truth or justice is neglected, or vice versa. This psalm declares that in God’s kingdom both mercy and faithfulness to the truth are honoured in their proper accord.

And here’s the thing – it’s not the case that we are to be merciful sometimes and just at other times – nor are we to simultaneously half-merciful and half-just, if that is even possible. No, what is being proclaimed here is that *real mercy* and *real justice* are not incompatible – they exist together. Real mercy is just, and true justice is merciful.

Pope Francis, as most of you would know, speaks with regularity about mercy, and led the Church through a prolonged reflection on this theme during a dedicated *Year of Mercy* back in 2016. But he is also very aware of the fact that true mercy does not come at the expense of truth or justice. Speaking to a gathering of bishops in the lead-up to the *Year of Mercy*, Pope Francis spoke of the temptations we can fall into on both sides of this dynamic.

One temptation that the Holy Father spoke of is what he called a “hostile inflexibility”, a desire to close oneself off within the letter of the law, and a refusal to be surprised by the God of surprises. This is characterised by an over-zealousness or a scrupulosity, and it can be seen most clearly in the scribes and Pharisees who condemned Jesus to death because he did not meet their expectations of how they thought God was supposed to act.

On the other hand, Pope Francis also spoke of a temptation to what he called “a destructive tendency to goodness”, that in the name of a false kind of mercy we can bind a person’s wounds without first treating and curing them – we only treat the symptoms, and not the causes and the roots. And as we know this temptation to throw out rules or norms in the name of compassion is quite common in our culture today.

In the one instance we can become hard-hearted in the name of defending truth. In the other instance we can become reckless in the name of mercy, and in so doing risk

creating even greater suffering. Mercy that is not compatible with truth and justice is not true mercy, and justice that is not merciful is not true justice.

We cannot emphasise an approach to mercy that encourages injustice and sin. Calling a hardened sinner to repentance can be an act of mercy. For instance, helping a drunkard in denial see that he has a problem and needs help is ultimately an act of mercy, because it recognises that the drunkard is not only a threat towards others, but that he is also miserable in the mess his life has become. On the other hand, a self-righteous emphasis on the letter of the law is only likely to put people on the defensive, and can often overlook the complex realities of individual situations.

We see that Jesus himself held these two virtues together throughout his ministry. On the one hand he made great demands on his followers and called us to a very high standard of life. We should not forget that whenever Jesus cured people and forgave them their sins, he always would add “now go and sin no more.” So often our culture seems to convert this from “now go and sin no more” to “now go and do whatever you want”!

Yet Jesus always coupled his demands with great mercy, and he was quick to forgive and comfort all those who humbly sought his assistance.

Moral guidelines will always be necessary, to chart the path of virtue and justice for us as we are in the process of maturing in our walk of discipleship. But at the end of the day, all of us are in need of God’s mercy. None of us are able to earn our salvation. Our own attempts at justice are so imperfect compared with God’s most perfect justice. Thank goodness that God’s mercy is also infinite. The appropriate response of one who has received such mercy is not to recklessly flaunt our freedom, but with great gratitude and humility to seek to live justly and generously in this world. In so doing, we will participate in the Lord’s immense justice and mercy.

For what is proclaimed in the psalm is to be our destiny too:

*Mercy and faithfulness have met; justice and peace have embraced.
Faithfulness shall spring from the earth, and justice look down from heaven.*