

SPG#142, Season after Pentecost C, P. 19

September 16, 2007 - Fr. Charles Pope

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 1 Timothy 1:12-17 Luke 15:1-10

The main theme in today's readings is one of those elusive, mercurial themes, that in these times is hard to nail down and see clearly. The theme is mercy. Even though we pray for God's mercy every Sunday in the Confession of Sin, the term can seem somewhat alien for our times. I recall when I first attended the Episcopal Church 17 years ago. In those days the people were using the 1928 Prayer Book for the last year before they would reluctantly let it pass into history so that the 1979 Prayer Book, which we use today, could be used. I was caught up in the beauty of the church, in the beauty of the liturgy. As I participated in the general confession, we read, "Lord, be merciful to us, miserable offenders, there is no health in us."

I cringed. I knew I was bad, but I didn't think I was that bad.

And so it goes. In the midst of working on our self esteem and thinking positively about life, it is hard to grasp mercy.

Our understanding of mercy connotes something evil and dark about us, something that needs God's mercy. And so it is tempting to let mercy become one of those outmoded, old-fashioned church words that used to mean something. And for many, it is an irritating thorn in our side when in the confession we ask for God's mercy.

And perhaps some of us may think that the Prayer Book evolved

beyond miserable offenders.

Maybe it will evolve beyond mercy as well.

And so the need for a fresh perspective on mercy is before us.

In the epistle reading from 1 Timothy, the apostle Paul refers to the time when he persecuted Christians. He speaks of God having mercy for him, even though he had acted in ignorance.

In today's gospel Jesus exhibits the kind of mercy that celebrates the importance of the individual.

One of the parables in the reading has a shepherd going out of his way to find one sheep, even though the other 99 are safe.

The other parable involves a woman who has ten silver coins, loses one and celebrates when she finds the one.

In the telling of these parables, Jesus elevates the status of two of the New Testament world's most submerged classes: shepherds and women.

In these two parables moving toward the seemingly insignificant individual is merciful; appreciating the significance of persons who are considered marginal is merciful. In the beatitudes Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Again and again, in the Old Testament, there are accounts where God says, "If you keep my commandments, I will love you.

I will have mercy on you." There is noticeably a communal flavor to this look at mercy. It is always about God's mercy to more

than one person, and sometimes to a whole nation.

In the apostle Paul's account of God having mercy on him, we run into something that may frustrate our efforts to understand mercy. We run into the inexplicable. It is hard to understand how God could take someone like Paul who had tormented and persecuted Christians as a career. It is hard to understand how he would all of a sudden have mercy on him. Why not the poverty stricken widow?

Somewhere out there is a person who is very much like us. That person carries with her or him a nagging deep question, "Is it really possible that God could have mercy on me? We know our shortcomings. We know what we do, and we know what we leave out.

Is it possible that God could love us anyway, that He could have mercy on us? We do know that in the stories and accounts of God and his people, and of God and individuals, that overall He has been eager to have mercy.

Some time ago I read the story of a Russian peasant who traveled throughout Russia. In his travels he encountered a man who instructed him in the use of the Jesus Prayer which simply read, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." The peasant recited this prayer hundreds and even thousands of times as he went about his activities. He says that in the midst of his recitations that he came to know a warmth and a sweetness that he had never known. He felt God's acceptance of him.

It could be that this story has a clue for us in our being able to grasp mercy. For the peasant did not attempt to grasp God's mercy. The peasant attempted to immerse himself in God's mercy, and he did.

Maybe it is not so important for us to completely understand mercy. Maybe it is important that we immerse ourselves in God's mercy even if we do not understand it. An important question, Is it possible to immerse ourselves in God's mercy without disparaging yourself as a person? Do you think God waits to hear how much a person will run themselves down before He is merciful?

I think not.

If we can be self assured before God; If we can be bold; If we can be courageous, can we also be vulnerable? Can we be as a child?

I have found in myself that I can be self assured and autonomous.

I can be bold and initiating. But does that mean that there are no parts of me that are afraid, that are vulnerable? Certainly not. If we approach the throne of God in boldness, can we also approach in vulnerability?

I expect that those who know the childlike part of themselves, those who know of their own vulnerabilities, they are the ones who reach for God's mercy. They are the ones who immerse themselves in God's mercy. The truth is, in knowing ourselves truly, we know about God's mercy. And when we know mercy we are merciful with each other. For Jesus said, **Blessed are the merciful. For they**

shall obtain mercy. Amen.