

14 - MERCY AND JUDGMENT

The third cluster of teachings might well be considered a summary of Israel's distinctive religious history. It can only be described as a covenant relationship. It depended on nothing less than God's own nature as a God of justice AND mercy.

The people whose traditions regarded them as "the Chosen People" knew by their long experience that God's judgment came swiftly and severely; but God's mercy followed as the day follows night. It was this that separated them from all of their neighbours. When Israel broke its part of the covenant - the responsibility to obey God's commandments - the people known as Israel suffered the consequences. That often meant disaster - famine, defeat in battle by hostile neighbours, slavery, invasion by imperial powers such as Egypt, Assyria and Babylon.

Such disasters are recorded again and again in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet the message was never without hope. It rested not in Israel's return to righteous behaviour, but in *chesed* - God's lovingkindness. Restoration, reconciliation and prosperity came as a result of divine mercy. This is the faith-story behind Jesus' teaching: "Be merciful as your Father is merciful."

Under the influence of the great prophets - Amos, Micah and Isaiah - this faith-history had direct implications in practical human terms. It set what Ringe calls "a standard for a certain kind of reciprocity: What one gives one can expect to receive. Mercy tempers judgment, both in the way one is

regarded and in the way each person treats others. Mercy transforms calculated measurement into abundance and generosity." (6:37-38)

The same standard applies in relation to human weakness. Luke drew a number of references also found in Matthew as "a parable." It is not strictly a parable, but a series of examples of how human weaknesses illustrated the point he was making. Instances - real or figuratively - of a blind person leading another blind person, the ignorance of students learning from their teacher, blaming others for one's own shortcomings are characteristics many people unconsciously display.

Are those as Ringe calls them, "obviously silly examples" and "exaggeration?" Surely not. They happen every day. Just listen to the august speeches of the leaders of one party accusing their opposition of leading the public astray with their policies and legislative actions. Or hear the common room chatter of college students criticizing their professors. Recently, journalists have had a field day commenting on what went wrong and who is to blame for bringing the global economy to a standstill. Each one of us can recall instances of the same kind of behaviour in our own family circle.

The standard is not how we behave, but how God treats us - with *chesed* - lovingkindness and mercy. The New Testament makes this abundantly clear in the life and teaching of Jesus, in the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and in the letters of Paul and the other authors. They tell us what the Good News is for all humanity.