

Homily for Divine Mercy Sunday, 2023

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Acts 2:42-47; Ps 117(118); 1 Pet 1:3-9; Jn 20:19-31

Theme: God's Mercy and Peace!

The Oxford Dictionary defines mercy as 'compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.' The Hebrew word in the bible for mercy is *racham*. It is the same word for the womb and also means loving feeling, tender love or compassion. Divine Mercy Sunday reminds us of God's tender love and care, like a mother protecting her unborn child and compassion for humanity by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins even when we did not merit God's mercy. All humanity deserved for her unfaithfulness and sinfulness was punishment. But Jesus Christ took upon himself the suffering due to our sins and offered us God's compassion and love. Divine Mercy Sunday invites us to share in that work of mercy in the world, loving and showing compassion to others as God has shown us in Christ. The church categorizes works of mercy into corporal and spiritual. While the former concerns material and physical needs, the latter concerns spiritual needs. We can show loving kindness to people by caring for their material needs or helping them develop their spiritual lives. Our readings today present both aspects of mercy.

In the first reading, the whole community of believers showed mercy to one another by taking care of their material needs. Our reading comes within the context of the Pentecost experience and the apostles' preaching about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament (Acts 2:1-36). The apostles and disciples of Jesus made many more disciples. We are told that in a single day, three thousand were added to their number (cf. Acts 2:41). With such a large number added to the group and many more who came to join the group, the apostles demonstrated how they lived with Jesus when he was with them, a life of sharing and *koinonia*, communion. Those who joined the group believed in the life of the apostles and their teachings about Jesus Christ and were ready to adopt that lifestyle. Part of the expression of their belief was sharing all things in common. Everyone saw their own as belonging to the group to be dispensed for the good of all so that no one lacked in the group. People had to sell what they owned, bringing the proceeds to a common purse for the good of all (cf. Acts 4:32-37). No one was compared to surrendering their property. Each person knew they were responsible for supporting everyone else and did it willingly (cf. Acts 5:1-2). For equity and fairness in the world's distribution of resources, there must be empathy and love for everyone, acknowledging that I have enough and must care for those who do not.

In the second reading, Peter offers us the spiritual aspect of mercy. Peter begins with the words, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!' *εὐλογητός* translated as 'Blessed' also means 'worthy of praise' or 'to be praised.' So we could say, 'worthy of praise is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' This praise is due to God because he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus. He has given us an imperishable, undefiled and unfading inheritance kept for us in heaven. He has guarded us through faith to the salvation He has revealed through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Peter urges his listeners to rejoice. Although they may have to suffer and grieve because of trials while they remain on earth, the trials are meant to purify them as gold is purified by fire. Peter concludes by praising his listeners for their faith in and love for Jesus though they had not seen him. We, too, must rejoice and be grateful for the gift of faith God has given us. It is a gift; hence it is difficult for some people to believe. We should see all we have as an act of divine mercy. We do not merit anything, not even faith, save God's love, kindness and mercy.

In the gospel, the Risen Jesus appeared to the disciples to bring them mercy and love in their distress in the aftermath of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As they were still afraid of the Jewish authorities, staying behind closed doors, Jesus, who now lives beyond time and

space and is no longer limited by them, suddenly appeared in their midst. Jesus' first words to them are: Peace be with you! The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. So Jesus said to them, '*shalom lachem*' peace be with you. The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Then He said to them again, *shalom lachem*! What is shalom, and why did Jesus wish them shalom?

Shalom in Hebrew is more than peace, as we understand it in English. It means to be whole, intact, prosperous, successful, and in a state of wellbeing and health. So shalom is a wish for the person's physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing and success in future endeavours. Do not forget that the disciples had forsaken the Lord during the passion. Probably, they were still feeling a sense of guilt for not supporting their master. For Jesus to tell them shalom means He did not hold anything against them. He had forgiven them and wished them well physically, mentally and spiritually. That was the reason they were glad. It was a sigh of relief for them. Jesus then went further to incorporate them into his mission. As the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you. Wishing them shalom was also a wish for success in their mission. Shalom was also a wish for success and prosperity. Jesus wishes his disciples both physical and spiritual wellbeing.

What about us today? How do we show mercy and love to others? The call from the readings is clear. We must show God's kindness to others by sharing our material resources with those who have less than us and our spiritual resources with those who need to improve their faith, have no faith, or have lost it. We must also be agents of peace in the world. Offering shalom to everyone around us, especially those who may have offended or neglected us in time of need and are scared to come close because they have disappointed us. We need to reassure them of our love and forgiveness.