

April 17, 2014

TEXT: Matthew 20:29-34

TITLE: Lord, Have Mercy

INTRODUCTION

After Coventry Cathedral in England was bombed during World War II, it was rebuilt and eventually re-dedicated in 1962. For that ceremony, Benjamin Britten was commissioned to compose a piece – and he wrote his “War Requiem.” It combined the Latin text from the requiem mass for the dead with poems written by Wilfred Owen. Owen was a World War I foot soldier who was killed one week before that war’s end on Armistice Day. One of the most moving parts of Britten’s War Requiem is the plaintive singing of the words, “Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison” which means “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.” In the video we will now see, the soloist has just sung one of Owen’s poems that asks the harsh question, “What passing bells will ring for these who die as cattle?” – which is followed by the tolling of bells and singing the words, “Lord, have mercy.”

VIDEO & SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 20:29-34

SERMON

Kyrie eleison – Lord, have mercy. It’s an important phrase built around the word “mercy.” The noun “mercy” and its synonyms almost always appear with a verb attached to it: Have mercy. Take pity. Show compassion. That is an interesting detail. “Mercy” is not something that exists by itself – something we can hold in our hands and dispassionately examine. Mercy is a quality of something else – an act done for someone that is merciful, compassionate, kind.

In our scripture passage for this evening, Jesus was leaving the city of Jericho fatefully heading toward the city of Jerusalem, when from the side of the road two blind beggars began shouting at him, “Lord, have mercy on us.” People tried to shush them, but that only prodded them to shout even louder, “Lord, have mercy on us!” Jesus paused and asked them what mercy they sought and they replied, “Let our eyes be opened.” Jesus, moved with compassion, touched their eyes and healed their blindness; and the two men now followed where Jesus led.

Mercy is usually something one person asks another person for. People say, “Have mercy. Have a heart. Be nice – help me out.” But there is an awkward power imbalance in this equation: one person has something, one person needs something, so they beg or plead “Have mercy on me.” If we’re brutally honest with ourselves, we find it hard to listen to someone asking for mercy. We don’t like to be approached by panhandlers. Someone’s hard luck story makes us feel uncomfortable. Frankly, the first surprise in our gospel story was that Jesus stopped to talk to the two blind men. It seems doubtful that anyone else in Jesus’ entourage cared to know how these two blind men were doing or wanted to help them out. But Jesus did and showed them a triple dose of mercy.

First, he listened to them – these blind guys everyone else tried to shut up. Second, he empowered them to do their part for a better future by asking them to say what it was they wanted. And third, he touched them with kind, healing hands. When was the last time either of those beggars had felt a friendly touch?

There's something here we need to remember. Our faith almost always offers a different path to follow from what the world would have us do. When American culture tells me that all I am good for is to produce or consume, the Bible tells me I am good for showing mercy and love. When the culture encourages me to think of myself as a rugged individualist, the Bible calls me to be a neighbor. When the culture hardens me to be a mere spectator of life, the Bible bids me to get involved: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with my God. Over and over, the Bible offers an alternative vision, not only of myself but also of other people and ultimately of the whole world. (B. Brown Taylor)

Lord, have mercy. Those two men shouted that out to a Savior they couldn't see but in whom they believed – likely believing more fully than all those other people around Jesus with perfect vision. And once Jesus touched them, they gained much more than just their eyesight. They regained a place in the human race. They could step from the margins of life to the center of life. They could move from the lowly, despised status of beggars to a position of equality with others – able to literally and figuratively look them in the eyes once again. They received mercy and now could follow Christ and show that same mercy to others. It's a great story and great reminder of a core principle of our faith.

Yet I keep coming back to that haunting “Kyrie Eleison” from Britten's “War Requiem.” It is one thing when someone from the margins of life asks for mercy – or even if you or I ask for mercy, pity, compassion from someone else. It is another thing to sing “Lord, have mercy” after hearing a poem about boy soldiers killed in war like cattle. Or saying “Lord, have mercy” when we read about other tragedies – a senseless shooting in a Jewish community center, violence in our schools, a natural disaster with lots of casualties.

Sadly, there is much in this life that we are unable to fix. There is much that is broken and messed up, through our fault and the fault of others, and we can't manage to make things right. So we shake our heads, shrug our shoulders, and pray to God, “Lord, have mercy.” The wonder of it all, though, is that God hears us. Christ stops and comes to us and asks us what it is we want. Then he opens our eyes to see a way forward, to see a way of healing and of peace.

On the surface, that's not a particularly profound comment to make in a sermon. We pray and Christ listens. But it is a fundamental faith idea that either you accept and live trusting it to be true, or you reject it and you spend your whole life feeling stuck and begging on the margins of a busy, indifferent world. We cannot fix ourselves and our world alone. Which is why we pray to God for help and mercy, and God in Christ hears and responds to our prayers.

Britten modeled that truth in his music by moving from a minor key to a beautiful major chord at the end. Jesus modeled that truth when he stopped and went over to two men, talked to them, touched them, and gave them back their lives. Jesus modeled that truth again when he set a table before his disciples – and sets it before us – and tells us that it is not just bread and wine, but his very essence. What greater love is there than this – to give oneself fully for others?

The noun “mercy” always has a verb attached to it: Have mercy. Take pity. Show compassion. We ask for mercy individually and collectively from a God who hears our prayer. Truly God does. Christ opens our eyes to the way forward that we should travel in following him. But first he brings us to his table and feeds us. And second he loves us completely, unconditionally, eternally.

And so, while we live, we will often pray “Lord, have mercy – Christ, have mercy – Lord, have mercy” to the holy One who does precisely that: have mercy. Thanks be to God.