

Sunday within the Octave of Christmas – The Mercy and Justice of God

In the name of the Father...

During this Christmas season, we marvel at the *mercy* of God who - to save men from their sins¹ - entered His own creation as a defenseless child, born in a stable, subject to the rigors of winter.

St Thomas observes that God's *mercy* is his greatest work toward his creatures.² St Paul writes: *For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*³ That is, God allowed man to fall that He might exercise *mercy* on all, and not from a distance but in their very midst.

God, however, also is *just*. Itself an expression of narcissism, "the disease of excessive self-admiration," a recent essay portrays the modern disposition of "entitlement"⁴ as a manifestation of the ancient vice of *presumption*, a sin against the virtues of both *magnanimity* and *hope*.⁵

The author observes that... *presumption leads to trust in a false understanding of God*. With Aquinas, he identifies the root of the problem: *The presumptuous ignore God's justice... presumption comes close to heresy... the denial of a truth about God, namely that He is just.*⁶ He continues that *presumption... is a grave offence... detracting from God's majesty... despising his justice... [conjuring up] a diminished image of the Deity... If we are all entitled to God's mercy, divine justice fades away even conceptually.*⁷

The author notes that for Aquinas *presumption* is a sin against *hope* and *magnanimity* rather than *faith* due to the practical effects of belief on appetite: *the essential characteristic of such beliefs is that they cause us to give up striving for conversion.*⁸ He continues that for Aquinas, *the moral life is arduous... it is a process of movement and growth in righteousness toward God... presumption is deadly because it short-circuits this process. One cannot be converted from one's sins if one denies that they present obstacles to one's salvation.*⁹

He concludes: *Presumption... involves settling for a deficient understanding of eternal life, for virtue's reward without virtue, for forgiveness without a new beginning, for mercy without one's broken relationships being righted, for a heaven in which we are not perfected... [T]he union with God [which] the presumptuous seek can only be one in which God turns out to be just like us, because we have refused to budge in order to become like him. The God of the presumptuous, it turns out, is really not that great.*¹⁰

¹ [Mt 1:21](#)

² [ST IIa IIae 30, 4, c](#)

³ [Rom 11:32](#)

⁴ Anthony R. Lusvardi, S.J., *A Presumptuous Age... Understanding the Age of Entitlement*, *The Thomist*, 81, (2017): 247-72

⁵ [ST IIa IIae 130](#), [ST IIa IIae 21](#)

⁶ Lusvardi p261, c.f., [ST IIa IIae 21, 1, sc](#)

⁷ *Ibid.*, p261-2

⁸ *Ibid.*, p262

⁹ *Ibid.*, p263

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p263

But the Incarnate God is great, and He expects great things of us. He did not enter His own creation, become like us, to confirm us in our mediocrity, much less our sin citing the “complexities of life.” Rather, He commands us to become like him. He commands: *Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*¹¹

We recently celebrated the feast of the Holy Innocents, the account of whose slaughter is unique to Matthew’s gospel. Besides relating Herod’s insane cruelty, Matthew would draw our attention to God’s redemptive designs. He writes: *Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremias the prophet, saying: A voice was heard in Rama, lamentation and great mourning; Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.*¹² The quote from Jeremiah refers to the Jews being deported to Babylon, just punishment for their sins. God then commanded that the weeping cease, for the Jews would return from their exile, an exercise of His *mercy*.¹³ Then, after the manner of Isaiah foretelling the sign that Israel would be freed from her persecutors: *The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel* – so also through the Holy Innocents Matthew alludes to the sign foretold through Jeremiah of the restoration: *For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth: a woman shall compass a man.*¹⁴

Certainly one of the more impenetrable prophecies favored by Matthew, St Jerome interprets it as the virginal conception of the Messiah... *that the Father of all things should be contained in a virgin's womb.*¹⁵ Following this sign, through Jeremiah God promised: *Behold, the days are coming... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke... For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel... I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts.*¹⁶

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, His law justly accused them. Now God’s act of *mercy* - *I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts* – infuses His righteousness so that He might then be *just* to those conformed to His law.

St Paul writes similarly. Remembering that... *[we] were enslaved...* he recalls the fulfillment of the prophecies: *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman.*¹⁷ And to what purpose? *To redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons... So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir.* To the slave under the law, God’s law was an insurmountable obstacle. But by the merits of the Incarnation – the new thing done by the merciful God, that a woman should compass a man, God sending forth his Son born of a woman – by the infusion of God’s righteousness: *I will put*

¹¹ [Mt 5:48](#)

¹² [Mt 2:17-18](#)

¹³ [Jer 31:15-20](#)

¹⁴ [Jer 31:22](#)

¹⁵ [St Jerome, Against Jovinian, Book 1, §32](#)

¹⁶ [Jer 31:31-33](#)

¹⁷ [Gal 4:4](#)

my law within them and I will write it on their hearts – then the law no longer accuses but rather advocates for its reward, the just reward of a son and heir. In this sense, reliant on God, we save ourselves, truly the most magnanimous work.

Quoting the Book of Sirach: *Of forgiveness be not overconfident, adding sin upon sin; say not "Great is His mercy, my many sins he will forgive"... Delay not to be converted to the Lord, and defer it not from day to day,*¹⁸ our author decried endemic narcissism, entitlement, presumption: *Presumption... relies inordinately on God's mercy... thinking oneself above the possibility of divine punishment... One's inflated understanding of oneself will lead one to take heaven for granted, imagining oneself so lovable that one starts to believe that God simply is unable to go on without one's presence. At this point, one has created a co-dependent deity and fallen into... presumption.*¹⁹ Or heresy, not only for a co-dependent deity, but also for a God who does not – cannot – condemn anyone. And yet Simeon prophesied: *Behold this child is set for the fall and for the resurrection of many in Israel.*

St Paul summarizes: *For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures...²⁰ [But] the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age... [H]e saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy... so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.* God's righteousness poured out is a work of His *mercy*, not our merit: but for those who do not cast it away, His reward of that righteousness is a work of His *justice*.

A distorted image of God's mercy abounds. A distorted image of God abounds, the one concocted by Martin Luther and condemned forcibly by the Council of Trent. God allowed man to fall that He might exercise *mercy*. His greatest merciful work was to enter His creation as the Redeemer that He might subsequently exercise *justice*. In the Incarnation God showed His *magnanimity*, His greatness. And by the merits of His Incarnation, He justly expects great things of us.

In the name of the Father...

¹⁸ [Sir 5:5, 8](#)

¹⁹ Lusvadi, p264, 266

²⁰ [Tit 3:3; 2:11-12; 3:5, 7](#)