

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Sep 7th 2015

On December 8, 2015, the Catholic Church will begin a year-long Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. Why would Pope Francis call for such a celebration? In *Misericordiae Vultus*, the document which the pope used to declare this unique event, he states the following in the first two paragraphs:

1. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. The Father, "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4), after having revealed his name to Moses as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6), has never ceased to show, in various ways throughout history, his divine nature. In the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), when everything had been arranged according to his plan of salvation, he sent his only Son into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, to reveal his love for us in a definitive way. Whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (cf. Jn 14:9). Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God.

2. We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

The pope wants us to see that God's mercy is at the heart of his redemptive act in Jesus Christ. He also wants us to grasp how easy it is to think that we are living for God when we really are not. Mercy may be the bridge that connects God and man but many religious people will have none of it. Somehow the mercy of God offends their sense of what is right and just.

We see this offense at God's mercy in today's Gospel reading. Jesus goes throughout the countryside teaching about the mercy of the Father and demonstrating that mercy by healing the sick and the possessed. Yet, many of the most religious hate him. They look for any and every opportunity to condemn him. One day Jesus went into a synagogue and there was a man with a withered hand. His enemies watch what he is about to do like vultures ready to swoop down upon a corpse. After asking the man to come and stand in the middle, he asks the crowd if doing good or showing mercy is acceptable on the Sabbath. After giving his enemies one last look, he told the man to stretch out his hand and it was restored. In one sense, Jesus didn't really do anything. He simply told the man what to do and God demonstrated his mercy. You would think that everyone would want to celebrate such a wonderful work of God. However, his enemies are enraged and huddle together to figure out what they can do to Jesus.

A Jubilee year in the Old Testament was a year for cancelling debts and setting captives free. It was a year for showing mercy. Jesus reveals the mercy of God. His accusers remind us of how easy it is to make religion something other than a demonstration of God's mercy. In his wisdom, Pope Francis invites us to take a year "to contemplate the mystery of mercy."

