

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Sep 11th 2015

The first reading in today's liturgy reminds us of the call to the universal church for the upcoming year devoted to mercy. Pope Francis recently called for a special Jubilee Year of Mercy beginning with the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in early December and concluding with the feast of Christ the King in 2016. Francis calls the year of Jubilee in a papal bill entitled "Misericordiae Vultus", the Face of Mercy.

The face of mercy invites each of us to receive the mercy and love of God and to be instruments of that received mercy for others; to be disciples of mercy after encountering Christ as our merciful brother.

St. Paul's letter to Timothy points us in this direction when he writes about his former life as "a blasphemer and a persecutor and an arrogant man." Paul, indeed, has a lot to make up for, and it all begins here with his insight into himself as a sinner. Despite his virulent pursuit of Christians to put them in jail for their violation of the Law, he is able to see clearly the truth about himself: "but I have been mercifully treated. The grace of mercy he receives is "abundant along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

Paul's words (and realities in his life) become a fine expression of the role of mercy in our lives. Just as Paul had acted out of "ignorance in (his) unbelief," so God's grace sets straight that ignorance and unbelief. We know the rest of the story: Paul becomes God's voice (or face) to the Gentiles in his preaching and founding of communities of faith in the known world. What a gift that is that we have inherited from him through God's love which results in his life as missionary for Christ despite his life as persecutor of the church. God's love and mercy is, to be sure, so much greater than Paul's lack of insight and the arrogance he speaks of to his friend, Timothy.

Where might we fit into this scenario? What is our arrogance and blasphemy? How does God find us and to what does he call us? Asking questions like this need not result in an "I'm no good" attitude. The mercy of God doesn't work that way. God's mercy takes us as we are and invites us to see the fuller picture.

St. Paul did not get stuck in his arrogance but became the face of God's care and concern for the churches he founded. He became an apostle. As I consider my failings and sinfulness I do not want to get stuck there either. I am invited to go even deeper: to see that I have been "mercifully treated" just like Paul.

Thus, I desire to look much deeper than my shortcomings and failings, to observe how God treats me, to see the mercy he extends toward me despite the sin. God's grace is clearly so much more powerful than my particular and peculiar form of selfishness. Like Paul, I can be freed up to be a source of mercy for others. Paul the apostle can show me how to become the disciple I am called to be by encountering Jesus who invites me to be part of the universal face of mercy (love) in a world that cries out for compassion, mercy and love.