

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Mar 1st 2016

When Pope Francis declared a Jubilee Year of Mercy he wrote the following: “At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives.” This is certainly true and is the call of each of today’s readings, the call to gaze upon mercy and become more merciful.

The first reading from the Book of Daniel is the prayer of Azariah, one of the three companions of Daniel who had been thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to worship the king’s image. Standing in the fire, Azariah asks God not to take away his mercy. He reminds God of his covenant promises to his ancestors. His appeal for mercy is quite interesting. He admits that he and the nation of Israel, currently in Babylonian captivity, have none of the traditional offerings to make – no burnt offering, sacrifice, oblation, or incense, and certainly no place to offer anything. His appeal is that God would be merciful by accepting something in place of these things, namely, contrite hearts and humble spirits. He requests that God accept these as acceptable sacrifices. Lord, he says, we follow you unreservedly with our whole heart, trust you, and fear you. Accept this, Lord, for this is the only sacrifice we can offer. Deal with us in your kindness and great mercy.

The responsorial psalm has the following refrain: Remember your mercies, O Lord. This sounds a lot like the prayer of Azariah. The psalmist reminds God that his compassion and kindness are from of old. You are good and kind, he declares, so please remember me, guide me, and show me the way. The psalmist admits to being a sinner and can only offer to God a humble heart but he reminds God that he shows the contrite mercy.

In both the first reading and the psalm, those who are in difficult situations and need help remind God that he is merciful. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus shows mercy from both sides. The first debtor is like Azarias and the psalmist – he desperately needs mercy. So, he begs for it. Jesus reminds the hearer that God, like the king in his story, is moved with compassion when we appeal to him for mercy and that he will indeed forgive us our debts. However, the other side of the coin is that we are to be like the king in the story and not like the man who, now no longer in dire straits, is lacking in mercy.

That is interesting. When I want and need mercy, I remind God that he is merciful. I want that mercy to be boundless, to cover all of my sins. On the other hand, when I think about dispensing mercy to others, I think like Peter – how many times should I forgive my brother? Or, I think like the first man in the story who felt that his debtor did not deserve mercy.

Why would we need to remind God to be merciful? Are we afraid that he is like us? We certainly realize that we are not deserving of mercy, as if anyone could be. We cannot offer anything to earn it. Jesus, the face of God’s mercy, assures us that we do not have to give God reasons to be merciful; he is merciful. Do others have to give us reasons to be merciful? When his children gaze upon He who is Mercy, they realize that this is the only reason necessary for his children to show mercy to others. That is who our Father is. That is who we are called to be.