

A God of Mercy and Compassion

“We come into this world on the breath of His Compassion, and we go out of this world on the breath of His Mercy”. At the beginning of Lent I came across this saying while reading *Breathing Alive* by Rashad Field. It has stayed with me ever since. Recently, while listening to the Gospel story of the Merciful Father I gained new insight into its meaning and a greater perception and acceptance of God as my Merciful Father.

I reread the parable while focusing principally on the psychological attitudes of the three characters presented in it. I began by looking at the attitude of the Father, who is the religious model *par excellence*. Comparing his attitude in itself and towards his sons, so different in behaviour towards him, he is portrayed as a totally open being, steadfast in love and in giving himself to his sons. He is utterly benevolent, as he shows, through his presence, his love and the goodness of his words and his treatment of others. At the same time he respects the autonomy and the will of his sons. He refuses to hold on to them or to suffocate them. He accepts their limitations and negativity, and even their refusal and aggression, while maintaining his trust and affability. He knows how to wait for the development of his sons' positive personality. He refuses to let his manner of being and acting be determined by their negative attitudes. He accepts the insubordination and revolt of the younger son and the opposition and unjust vindications of the elder son.

The younger son sees the father from his own narrow perspective as omnipotent, the incarnation of the law. He sees him as someone who demands respect and submission and who contrasts greatly with his own desire for affirmation and freedom to take initiative and enjoy life. He opts for separation from his father. His search for freedom without limits and absolute pleasure necessarily lead to delusion and he comes to see that the true face of the father respects and sustains human freedom. He recognises the interdependence between mercy and conversion and resolves to return to the father.

The father shows his welcoming goodness towards the younger son and sees not who he is but who he will become. “He threw his arms around his neck and kissed him”. This underlines the fullness of his welcome. The placing of the ring on his finger and the “finest robe” on his shoulders symbolise the great value he attributes to his youngest son. By running out to meet him he shows that he takes his conversion seriously, restores his value and confirms his personality. Killing the fatted calf indicates giving the greatest possible honour to his much loved younger son. He feels a great joy to have “this son of mine who was dead has come back to life; he was lost and is found”. He rejoices that this son who had detached himself from his father has now reconciled himself with him.

The elder son, at first seems to need neither conversion of his life nor the mercy of the father. He observes the law perfectly and spends his life and energy in the service of the father with no room for diversion or enjoyment. His statement to the Father, “For years now I have slaved for you without ever disobeying one of your orders” is true, but the following words “Yet you never even gave me a kid goat for a feast with my friends” reveals a deep seated resentment of the father. One is struck by the fact that he uses neither the word “father” nor “brother” and refers to himself as “servant”. It

is obvious that his life is all the poorer in that he lacks filial and fraternal openness. The elder brother has lived a life which instead of fulfilling and liberating him, makes him a prisoner. He has sought perfection and impeccability and sacrificed to them every human joy. He has put his focus on himself while striving to be approved by God. He has failed to see that God's goodness is stronger than human weaknesses and imperfections and He does not respond to them with retaliation.

Catherine looked to the merciful Father as the source of goodness. Her journey through life was a gradual and dynamic process. She learned that he was a benevolent respectful and steadfast presence and she constantly accepted His gratuitous gift of Himself. She took pleasure in His love and returned it with a genuinely childlike attitude. She was always aware that "everyone called to His service should be happy" and that "we should never falter in our confidence that God will make all things turn to the best." To her He was surely a God of Mercy and compassion. He is the same God of Mercy and Compassion to us.

Anne Hannon RSM
March 9, 2010