

The Cross as a Symbol of **God's Forgiveness (Mercy)**

*"In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"*¹

We have been investigating the rich and diverse symbolism represented by the cross on which Jesus died. I cannot think of another religious object which conveys the character and message of God, in as complete detail, as does the cross.

We started with a review of the cross as a symbol of our sin, to which God put an end on the cross; we examined the cross as a symbol of God's covenant faithfulness, the cross as a symbol of God's grace, the cross as a symbol of our identity and belonging as God's very special creation made in His image, and today will examine the cross as a symbol of forgiveness, which is only possible because of God's mercy.

Among Shakespeare's many plays, is *The Merchant of Venice*. It will be distracting to go through the details of the play, so let's pick up the story when Shylock the Jew, a moneylender hears the news, one of Venice's prominent merchants, Antonio, lost a ship at sea (his third ship to be lost at sea) possibly carrying Shylock's daughter who had eloped, taking with her a sizeable portion of her father's wealth.

Antonio had borrowed 3,000 ducats from Shylock with the promise to repay 6,000 ducats, failing which, Antonio would allow Shylock to take a pound of his flesh.

The matter goes to court, where a rich and beautiful heiress Portia, disguised as a man, acts as defence lawyer for Antonio. Shylock insists, "*I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond,*"² and refuses to listen to any plea for mercy.

Portia continues to plead with the Jew to show mercy.

¹ 1 Peter 1:3

² Merchant of Venice 3.3.4

Portia then speaks the famous lines which we had to memorise in school when we studied this play, *The quality of mercy is not strain'd (forced); It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.* I could go on in Shakespearian English, at the risk of developing a permanent lisp.

In contemporary English, however, Portia says: *No one shows mercy because he has to (forced to). It just happens, the way gentle rain drops on the ground. Mercy is a double blessing. It blesses the one who gives it and the one who receives it. It is strongest in the strongest people. It looks better in a king than his own crown looks on him. The king's sceptre represents his earthly power, the symbol of majesty, the focus of royal authority. But mercy is higher than the sceptre. It's enthroned in the hearts of kings, a quality of God himself. Kingly power seems most like God's power, when the king mixes mercy with justice. So although justice is your plea, Jew, consider this. Justice won't save our souls. We pray (ask) for mercy, and this same prayer teaches us, to show mercy to others as well. I've told you this to make you give up this case. If you pursue it, this court of Venice will need to carry out the sentence against the merchant there.*

Shylock replies, *I take all responsibility for my decisions. I want the law, the penalty, and the fulfilment of my contract.*³

Let's pause here for a moment. We live in a world which is governed by systems of laws. Correct me if I am wrong, but I understand, **ONE** of the reasons we voted out from the European Union, is that we **felt** strangled by the complex web of EU laws. Laws can be beneficial, but they can also hinder, obstruct and create difficulties. The Working Time Directive, the complex nature of Health and Safety regulations, all intended to keep people safe, were often enforced, for the sake of enforcing the law.

³ The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1

Shylock decides to stick with the law. *We have a contract with a penalty. You cannot force me to accept repayment, if I wish to enforce taking a pound of flesh, instead.*

The dictionary definition of **mercy** is *compassion shown or forgiveness offered toward someone, whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.*

The Apostle Paul, who went through a traumatic conversion experience, informed the Church at Ephesus, *“Living in this world whose ruler is satan himself, we, like all the rest, by virtue of our nature, are deserving of the full force of God's anger, and destined for death. But because of God's great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our sins.”*⁴

In writing these words, Paul might well have re-lived the agony and pain he inflicted on others when he persecuted the church. He knew all the time, because of his past actions, he was deserving of the full force of God's anger. After his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul understood with deep conviction, God's mercy is f-a-r greater than God's anger! The entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation repeats this truth, *“God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love”*⁵. The Bible is also replete with the advice, *“A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offence.”*⁶

Let's get back to the *Merchant of Venice*. Shylock insists, he has the **right** to choose how he will enforce the penalty of loan default. The language of **rights** is not helpful. It is very self-centred and does not recognise any other person. In a marriage relationship, the language of **rights** (*my right*) in an obvious route to failure and breakdown.

⁴ Ephesians 2:4

⁵ Psalm 145:8

⁶ Proverbs 19:11

Despite Portia's many pleas, Shylock insists the law give him the right to do what he wants. Now comes the next twist in the story. Portia takes Shylock's insistence on the letter of the law to its absurd conclusion. She wants to teach Shylock, the futility of the law. The bond Shylock had in his hand, entitled him to **only** one pound of flesh, "*no jot of blood.*" Portia's clever piece of legal hairsplitting carries the day. *Not a hair's weight more than a pound of flesh, and most certainly without a jot of blood; that is all you can take, because it is in the bond you signed!* This is what you want from a good Barrister; this is what you pay them to do for you: find a way out of the law, by endorsing the law!

Realising he has met his *nemesis*, Shylock withdraws his case, and agrees to accept payment instead. A further battle of wit takes place and Shylock finds himself on bended knee before the judge! In yet another twist in the tale, the judge pardons his life before Shylock can beg for mercy.

I have yet to come across a better demonstration of mercy and the power of forgiveness. Portia is absolutely right when she says, "*mercy is enthroned in the hearts of kings (anyone in power and position of authority), a quality of God himself.*"

The laws and systems of this world **seem** to offer solutions to everyday problems. We are led to believe, laws and legislation will stop the harmful effects of climate change; we are led to believe, laws and legislation will reduce all crime, including gun crime.

Writing to the Church in Rome, Paul says, *The Law has **never** succeeded in producing righteousness; the reason it failed was always due to the weakness of human nature. God sends His Son to clothe Himself with this weak human nature which has fallen prey to sin, the cause of all trouble, to defeat it through His death and resurrection.*

The law offers "life" (reprieve from punishment) by obedience to it, and death through disobedience, but the cross reminds us of God's mercy;

though we may be deserving of death for living in obedience to laws which are perversions of God's laws, and for some for having broken the law, it is well under God's power to leave us to the penalty under the law, **BUT** He chooses not to leave us under the penalty of the law.

The empty cross reminds us of God's mercy. When we approach the cross in a spirit of humility, recognising the law has failed us in being righteous, because the law itself is perverted, God is faithful to forgive and receive us, as His own, into His presence, in a renewed, joy-filled relationship.

The Apostle Peter tells us how to respond. *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus the Christ from the dead"*⁷.

May this mystery unfold in our hearts and minds, as we approach Easter.

AMEN

⁷ 1 Peter 1:3