



THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF MERCY

'Be merciful just as your Father is merciful' Luke 6:36

The meanings of 'mercy' as a word used in Scripture

Background

As Christians, understanding 'mercy' is central to our understanding and living out our faith in God. Central to the mystery of God's being is mercy! The sacred scriptures tell the story of God's overwhelming love and favour for his people across all time, particularly evident at the most difficult points in our history. We see in the twists and turns of the story of the people of God, and in our own stories that God's mercy is and always will be greater than any 'turning away' from him. It was always his plan to save us from the consequences of our frailties – our deafness, our blindness, our sheer selfishness – and the Saviour is the Word of God, made flesh in Jesus. We hear it from the lips of St John,

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.' (John 3:16)

We cannot place limits on God who is always ready to pour out his loving kindness, always seeking out, waiting, to welcome, embrace and forgive. Mercy is the way God comes to meet us, as Pope Francis says in his announcement of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus*. Mercy is the bridge that connects us with God. If we take time to reflect on the word 'mercy' as used in scripture, and the words it is used alongside, this will help us to open our hearts to the great tenderness, compassion and hope God offers – to know and find that we are loved forever, in spite of our stumbling in the dark, our faults and failings. (See MV2)

The word 'mercy'

The word '*hesed*' in Hebrew, translated as '*eleos*' in Greek, and '*misericordia*' in Latin, is given as 'mercy' in most modern English bibles. All we mean when we think about 'mercy' cannot really be expressed in a single English word. If you google 'mercy' you will find words like compassion, forgiveness; to feel, or to give relief from suffering, to feel a depth of kindness that makes you forgive. 'Mercy' is a word that contains something of both 'God' and 'humanity' in it. The 'attitude of mercy' is basic to Hebrew and Christian religion and way of life.

It is easier to understand what the Hebrew and Greek words, '*hesed*' and '*eleos*' cover by looking at the passages in scripture where they are used, and taking the other words used round them in different situations as 'clues' to their

meaning. The basic meaning does not change. It is one of those 'bottomless' words, and our insights have developed over hundreds of years.

The most common words used alongside 'mercy' in scripture.

Over the Jubilee Year, you may like to take each mercy-word combination given in this resource and reflect

- How does this meaning ring true in your experience?
- What relationships or situations require this sort of 'mercy' – In your family life? In your parish? In the wider community?
- How might this 'expanded' meaning of the word 'mercy' help in your **practical** living out of the Jubilee year, in family, parish, and wider community?

Mercy in the Old Testament – Hebrew 'Hesed'

1. Mercy as standing firm or in solidarity with, loyal and dependable

Used with 'emet' or 'faith' the meaning of *hesed* is connected with 'solidarity', 'standing firm with', 'loyalty', 'making someone dependable'. It is something you can actively *do* for others, or for God (Gen 24:12 or Gen 40:14). It is something that is expected as part of good human relationships, or a returning of a kindness, i.e. you have received mercy, be merciful in your turn. It's not something you *have* to do, but something you *choose* to do from a generous heart. E.g. Lot's guests warning him to leave Sodom was a great *hesed* (Gen 19.19) the guest and host become 'like family' during the period of hospitality.

2. Mercy with Justice

'*Muspat*' or 'justice' is the virtue often put alongside '*hesed*' mercy. Both are part of the conversion of heart that God demands, in Hosea 12:7 'to return to God, maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always' (NIV Bible), and Micah 6:8 adds 'humility' to complete the will of God, 'to act justly, and to love mercy, and walk humbly with your God' (NIV Bible). This is how God deals with humanity, and asks humanity to see these virtues as a duty. They are listed as the attributes of a leader (Ps 101:1). The judge is a deliverer, revealing God's will to save! (Gen 19.19, 40:14)

3. Mercy with living a moral life: 'righteousness'

'*Dakah*' or 'righteousness' used with *hesed* is first attributed to God, who shows this *dakah hesed* to people doing their best to live moral lives. It also links to God's will to seek out and save the lost (Ps 36.10, 40.10-11, 143:11). This 'righteous *hesed*' is also an attribute of a human ruler, a Davidic king, establishing a throne (Is 16:5 and Proverbs 20:20). The *hesed* of a king is shown in his sense of justice and right-judgment, seeking the welfare of his people.

4. Mercy as God's 'Will to save' and bring Peace

'*Yesua*' or 'will to save/salvation' and '*salom*' or peace when used with *hesed*, describes God whose help is near (Ps 85:8-9), ready to 'save' us from all harm and bring us peace (Ps 85:11). By contrast, where God takes away his '*hesed*' blessing, love or pity from the people, there is lack of comfort and consolation, joy or gladness, and no more '*salom*' or peace. (Jer 16:5)

5. *Mercy as Mutual feelings of love, 'betrothal', divine and human*

'Hesed' is often associated with deep feelings and love (Jeremiah 2:2), e.g. In the description of the Bride Israel's feelings for God, and God's love for the Bride (Jer 31:3). God's saving-loving action for humanity is described in terms of an engagement or 'betrothal' e.g. in Hosea 2:21. God expects humanity to show this *hesed* love to one another e.g. Zechariah 7:9, to *'administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or orphan, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'*

6. *Mercy as gut-wrenching compassion & forgiveness – as between parents and children*

'Hesed' with '*rahmim*' or '*rehem*' meaning 'womb' or 'gut' describes a literally gut-wrenching mercy with compassion. This is used particularly with reference to relationships of parents and children, and those who are helpless (like children) or have suffered ill-fortune. It compares God's mercy to the parent-child relationship of mercy (Ps 103:11-13) *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him¹* as far as east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.* God's saving action comes from God's gut-wrenching *hesed* love (Is 63:7), and also describes the Israelites love for each other (Zec 7:9). The Psalmist appeals to the everlasting *hesed* loving compassion of God that overwhelms any turning away and is full of forgiveness (Ps 25:6, 40:12, 51:3). Several psalms that appeal to this form of heart-wrenching parent-child like '*hesed*' love relating to forgiveness, Pss 23:6, 25:6, 40:11, 51:11.

Hesed rahmim (rehem-womb) is the compassionate, heart-stretching, forgiving love we are all to have, most obviously illustrated in relationships in the home.

7. *Mercy as 'Covenant' - a vow, a bond, a promise of faithful love, God abounding in love*

'Hesed' is used with '*covenant*' to express the faithful love of God towards those who love God and keep his commandments (Exodus 20:6). In Isaiah (55:3) the Covenant itself is called a '*hesed*' that both preserves and demonstrates God's everlasting faithfulness and love: *'I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David'*. (Further examples in 2 Sam 7:15, 1 Kings 3:6, Ps 89:29, Ps 34,50). '*Hesed*' covenantal love in God is stronger than *hesed* in humanity – God is constantly ready to forgive and to build relationships, even when people attempt to destroy them. God expects us to show *hesed* towards God through listening, acknowledging God, and loving God, rather than unfaithful love for God, which is like an early morning mist that disappears (Hosea 4:1, 6:4, 6)

8. *God's character is 'hesed': Mercy as God's initiative and desire to save!*

All God's dealings with Israel can be summed up as '*hesed*' i.e. God's desire and initiative to protect and save from harm. e.g. Isaiah 54:8, 55:3, Jeremiah 33:11, Micah 7.20; Psalms 85:8, 90:14, 100:5, 106:1, 107:1.

Hesed is the key to understanding the character of God. *Hesed* is not only covenant love which is affectionate and faithful, uniting the partners in the covenant, but is also the will to *move towards* covenant love i.e. a broad, all embracing movement of the will to do good, rooted in a goodness of the heart, the wellspring of love and kindness. e.g. Isaiah 54:10 *"though the mountains may be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you;* Isaiah 63.7 *I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord...the many good things he has done... according to his compassion and many kindnesses...in his love and mercy he redeemed them;* Jeremiah 31.3 *I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving kindness;* Micah 7.18cf

¹ It is worth noting here that the biblical term '*fear of the Lord*' i.e. having respect and reverence for God, being in awe of his power, is seen as the starting point to finding real Wisdom, e.g. see Job 23:23, Proverbs 1:7-9 where there are exhortations to embrace wisdom '*Listen my son to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck'*.

'Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives transgression... you do not stay angry for ever but delight to show mercy. You will have compassion on us and tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob and show mercy to Abraham as you pledged to our fathers in days long ago'.

The word 'mercy' in the New Testament – Greek '*Eleos*'

1. '*Eleos*' is God's nature – revealed in Jesus is the 'face of the Father's mercy'

The word most often translated as 'mercy' in the New Testament is the Greek word '*eleos*', which contains a much broader meaning than might at first appear. '*Eleos*' is frequently linked to the breadth of understandings of the Hebrew word '*hesed*' translated as 'mercy' in the Old Testament.

However, in the New Testament, **we can see much more clearly** the '*Eleos*' of God as 'God's saving will' – it precedes, accompanies and brings to completion the whole process of God's plan in Jesus, for saving humanity from self-ruin, selfishness and greed, and all ensuing harm. **God's mercy is made visible, revealed through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, 'the face of the Father's mercy'** (MV1). Pope Francis continues in *Misericordiae Vultus*, 'When everything had been arranged according to his plan of salvation, God sent his only Son into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, to reveal his love for us in a definitive way.'

2. '*Eleos*' – mercy motivated by limitless love

In a fully human understanding, shown to us in Jesus, the word mercy, *eleos*, is intimately connected to '*agape*' or self-giving love, and is lived out in the readiness to do good and to forgive. As we have discovered in the Old Testament reflections on the word, our English word 'mercy' alone is not enough to describe the fullness of its meaning. It is best accompanied by the word 'love' or 'loving' – and this is a powerful development seen in the New Testament, giving '*eleos*' the motivation of 'love', in a much more obvious and deeper way than we see in the Old Testament.

In all the Gospel accounts, Jesus applies Hosea 6:6 as a model for his own attitude and actions towards all those he meets, and for us too, in all our relationships and situations: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'.

Year C, The Gospel of Luke

The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy is taking place in **Year C of the Sunday Cycle of scripture readings**, with the Gospel of St Luke at their heart. Every week we have an opportunity to take some time out, and reflect on the scriptures, with particular reference to the word 'mercy', and see how they speak to us in our families and parishes.

Here are some examples of the ways in which the word 'mercy' is used in the New Testament:

1. *Luke – mercy as the loving kindness of the heart of our God', flowing out in active love of neighbour*

The song of Mary, soon to be mother of Jesus, and the prophecy of Zechariah, father-to-be of John the Baptist both appear in the first Chapter of Luke's Gospel, and both are praising God's mercy and great plan springing from the '*loving kindness of the heart of our God*', using the word '*eleos*' for mercy. Later in the Gospel of Luke, 10.37, the proof of love of neighbour is in showing '*eleos*' i.e. 'helping those in need'.

In this parable of the **Good Samaritan**, Jesus asks, *'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'* The expert in the law replied: *'The one who had mercy on him'*. Jesus told him, *'Go and do likewise.'*

2. **Matthew – mercy as an attitude of justice and faithfulness**

Jesus is ready to associate with everyone with an *eleos* attitude, calling them to enter and live in the kingdom of God, beginning now in their lives in the present moment. *'Eleos'* is an important hallmark of the law of justice with mercy, not to be neglected. It serves as an examination of conscience for us all. *'Eleos'* signifies breadth and tolerance against the rigid upholding of the law. **Jesus is a witness to, and comes to make 'real', the 'eleos' we can expect from God.** e.g. (5:7) The Beatitudes: *'Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy'*; (9.13) the calling of Matthew, and Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners: *'It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice' for I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'*; (12.7) The disciples were hungry, eating the corn. When criticized by the Pharisees, Jesus uses the same word for mercy as an attitude of justice: *'If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath'*; (18:33) *'The master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'* Here again, mercy is a component of the law, and being ready to forgive from the heart. Throughout Matthew chapter 23, Jesus is advising the people to obey the teachers of the law, but not to do what they do, because (v3-4) *'they do not practice what they preach, and tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them, saying to the Pharisees (v 23) 'you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness'*

3. **'Eleos' mercy as a demand of the Christian life: Love your neighbour as yourself.**

Throughout his short letter, **St James** encourages us: Yes, listen to the Word, but then do what it says! Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. Don't show favouritism to the rich because that insults the poor whom God has chosen to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom promised to those who love him. James says loving your neighbour as yourself is the key, *'the royal law founded in Scripture (2:8)*, and as long as you do this, *'you are doing right'*. He warns (2:12) *'speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy (eleos) will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful, and (2:13) 'Mercy (eleos) triumphs over judgment!'* and (2:17) *'Faith if it is not accompanied by action, is dead'*. In the middle of the letter, chapter 3 (13-18) James refers to mercy (*eleos*) as **a component of wisdom**, saying you can tell a truly wise person by their deeds **done in humility**: *'The wisdom that comes from heaven is pure, peace-loving, kind and considerate, full of mercy, and shows itself by doing good; nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it.'*

4. **'Eleos' as 'God's will to save'**

This is the most frequent use of *'eleos'* in the New Testament, as echoed in the use of *'hesed'* in the Old Testament. It is God's *'eleos'* through which Jesus comes to save humanity. God is motivated by *'eleos'* and not what we deserve. St Paul has his ministry through *'eleos'*, God's mercy being a healing power. St Peter too praises God in his great mercy.

Ephesians 2:4 *Because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ... It is by grace you have been saved through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not your works...';*

1 Peter 1:3 *Praise be 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 Christ from the dead'....*

Titus 3:5. *'When the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy';* 2 Corinthians 4:1 ministry *'through God's mercy';*

Philippians 2:27 *Indeed he (Epaphroditus) was ill and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow (if he had died).*

‘In this Jubilee Year, may the Church echo the word of God that resounds strong and clear as a message and a sign of pardon, strength, aid, and love. May she never tire of extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort. May the Church become the voice of every man and woman, and repeat confidently without end: ‘Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.’ (Ps 25:6) MV25.

Further source of reference (1) Dictionary of the Bible, John L McKenzie SJ (1995, Touchstone Books) (2) New Jerome Biblical Commentary (1989, London, Geoffrey Chapman)