Sermon preached by Dr Augur Pearce on 10th October 2021

Readings: Mark 10:17-31; Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16

Lord, open your Word to our hearts, and our hearts to your Word. **Amen**.

That human beings are flawed is a reality only too well-known to most of us here. It is also a very common theme in the message and worship of the Christian community. The ancient story of the Fall seeks to reconcile the perfection of God's original creation with the all-too-obvious fact that we are not perfect now. It ends with judgment – the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden where they committed their first offence. And that theme of judgment echoes through the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament – the despair of Cain, realising he has killed his brother; the Flood which sweeps away all but a favoured few; the penalties laid down in the Law of Moses; the plagues and prophecies of doom as the Israelites doubt and disobey, injure their neighbours and turn to other gods, the pleas for (and predictions of) uncompromising justice in the Psalms. Then come the exile to Babylon and the loss of Israel's and Judah's independence. Jesus himself speaks of judgment on many occasions, perhaps the best-known being his description of mankind divided into sheep and goats, set respectively on God's right and left. The New Testament writers take this imagery further, until we reach the plagues and fires and demons of the Revelation to John. And in later Christianity awareness of sin and the fear of Hell have often played a significant part – to take just one example, the terror of the young postgraduate student, Martin Luther, during the thunderstorm which led him to become an Augustinian friar.

There is, of course, a 'but'; and it is a very significant 'but'. God judges, but judgment is never the end of the story. Adam and Eve are given children and learn how to survive by their own labour; Cain's life is spared and he is protected from those who would kill him for his crime. The Flood is followed by a promise to Noah that such a punishment will never be inflicted again. Repentance and prayer bring the Israelites' plagues to an end, the Babylonian exile is followed by the Return, and Jesus speaks of the joy in heaven over a single penitent sinner.

This divine balance between justice and mercy is something Christian societies have long sought to emulate. During the Coronation service, English monarchs have promised since the Glorious Revolution that law and justice, in mercy, will be executed in all their judgments. Later in the service, the monarch is presented with a sceptre, one of the symbols of royal authority, topped with a dove, which has always been associated with gentleness. The charge accompanying this sceptre is 'Be so merciful that you be not too remiss; so execute justice that you forget not mercy'. Though kings and queens have not, for centuries, decided lawsuits in person, the judges who do decide such cases have no authority but what they derive from the Crown. Our courts too are therefore called to this difficult balancing act – to hold the scales between society and the individual, without brushing guilt or injury under the carpet, but equally without harshness, and (in criminal cases) taking account of genuine remorse.

It is not only in lawcourts that justice must be done. I recently completed my own contribution to a new disciplinary process for ministers in the United Reformed Church, which was adopted by the General Assembly in July, though refinements are still ongoing. Others amongst us here serve on disciplinary bodies for other professions, or may have to take decisions as employers or school teachers or local magistrates. Every church meeting is tasked with 'upholding standards of membership' amongst those on its membership roll. And every parent faces at some point the question of what to do about a child whose recent behaviour has not been all they might wish.

What then do we learn about this complicated business of combining justice with mercy, from what we have heard in our readings today? I want to draw out just two points. First, true justice is based on listening and knowledge of the facts. The writer to the Hebrews says that before God 'no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account'. Human judges and juries, employers and parents do not share that divine characteristic. They cannot 'read the secrets of the heart'; but they can do their best to hear all sides of a case, to distinguish fact from fiction, and resist the temptation to follow partially-informed or prejudiced opinions of the public and the media. Even Job, who is portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures as suffering unjustly, simply because the Tempter wishes to test his loyalty to God, is convinced that, were he able to address God directly, he would be listened to, and be able to secure an acquittal. The only difficulty he perceives is that he cannot approach God in this way.

And secondly, mercy is not confined to the innocent. It includes taking account of mitigating factors, recognising the effect particular penalties may have on individual offenders, and tailoring decisions accordingly to specific cases. Jesus, described in the letter to the Hebrews as the universal High Priest, both officiant and victim in the once-for-all sacrifice for sin, is also clearly being portrayed as a judge (a role human High Priests of the time sometimes played – for example Caiaphas); and it is therefore a real reassurance that he knows how strong temptation can be, that he sympathises with human weakness.

Which brings us back to our Gospel reading. We have already reflected on some of the pitfalls that wealth can bring, even to those who set out with the best of intentions. Wealth can distract. It can bear witness to a miserly or exploitative disposition. It can engender a false pride, or lead to reliance on a security not anchored in God. The rich man who came to Jesus had clearly fallen into at least one of those traps, possibly all four; and he went away sorrowfully, rather than pursuing the remedy Jesus recommended. 'Who then can be saved?' asked the disciples, implying that the rich man was not 'saved'. But Jesus never said that. When he first met the man, he 'looked on him and loved him'. From all we know of Jesus, it is hard to believe he stopped loving him by the end of that conversation. Maybe the rich man lacked something important: but there were also things lacking amongst the poor: poor people, for example, who would not give up their family ties to follow Jesus, or who broke the very commandments that the rich man followed. A falling short of perfection does not debar anyone from the divine mercy. The rich man's responsibilities prevented him from joining the Twelve; but eternal life was not just promised to the Twelve, or even to the poor. At the end of the day, the rich man did not deserve eternal life. But neither does anyone else. If there is one thought to take home from what we have heard today, it is that salvation by human effort is impossible, but 'for God all things are possible'.

Amen.