



**Twenty-fourth Sunday Ordinary Time 2005**

**Eccl.(Sirach) 27:30- 28:7 Romans 14:7-9 Matthew 18: 21-35**

The theme of today's readings is Mercy.

We have two short stories that are strongly contrasted. In the first, a king in the midst of an audit finds that a minor official owes thousands. According to custom he orders the man and his family to be sold to cover the cost of the debt. The man asks for mercy and he is granted, not simply what he asked for, which was, more time to pay, but extraordinarily, the remission of the whole debt.

Such a story would have brought a gasp of astonishment from the hearers, "Would we could serve such a King."

The second story is dark and shocking. The lucky official on leaving the presence of the king, runs into a fellow official who owes him a couple of hundred. He grabs the fellow by the throat and threatens him. The frightened man begs for more time but his plea is not heard. The hapless official is sent to prison.

This story leaves us shocked by the ruthless attitude of the official and his inability to relate his experience of mercy to his own behaviour. "How could he do that?" we ask ourselves.

Using a different style, Sirach comments, "Wrong doing can be so engrained that a person acts in an unjust manner without consciously being aware of it."

The writer goes on to say that the action is a result of disordered attitudes. Underneath the callous vengeful behaviour lie pride and anger.

Now pride and anger are feelings that are a normal part of our human make-up; we feel pride in our family our talents; anger is experienced when we are insulted or our values questioned.

When our proud or angry feelings are translated into actions which damage our own or another's personal well being then they are 'out-of order'. Some people, Sirach says, hug anger tight. They nourish it until it becomes a destructive energy which causes harm.

We have to learn to use the energy of our anger in appropriate ways. We probably believe that we could not act as the unjust official did. Yet God pardons us as readily. Do we avert to this when we judge and condemn others?

Perhaps we do not recognise the absolute mercy of God because, over the year, the people who speak in God's name have tended to talk more about God as punisher rather than God as merciful, yet we read, "I will have mercy, not sacrifice." God says. Good works are not a substitute for a forgiving heart.

The healing of our own spirits comes from developing a new heart. The seeds of vengeance must not be allowed to take root. We need to watch for the small expressions of injustice towards others and practice mercy.

Anger can be righteous, for example when we are cheated, dispossessed, or made the butt of jokes. We feel the energy which seeks to right the wrongs . A disciple of Jesus has to find the way to redress the wrong, without creating new wrongs. This is very difficult, to find peaceful solutions which end hostilities, takes time and commitment.

Paul says that the kingdom of God is about justice, peace and joy. Faithful disciples will keep trying to bring the mercy of God to damaged spirits.

Patricia Stevenson.rsj.