



KNAPHILL BAPTIST CHURCH

**2016
YEAR OF MERCY
LENT STUDIES**



‘LOVING MERCY’

by Rev Julia Binney

‘He has shown all you people what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk
humbly with your God’ - Micah 6:8

2016 THE YEAR OF MERCY

Introduction

Throughout this year we are thinking about and reflecting on God's mercy. We started the year looking at Titus 3:4-5, 'But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy'. Mercy is defined as, *'a deep, heartfelt compassion aroused, by the need or distress of another, in one who is in a position to relieve such need or distress but who has no requirement to do so other than the impetus of their compassion.'* It incorporates such things as loving-kindness, pity, forbearance, grace, forgiveness. These are all attributes of God; mercy and compassion are fundamental to his very nature. 'The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love' (Psalm 103:8), 'He is the father of all mercies and the giver of all comfort' (2 Corinthians 1:3). He has no requirement to show us mercy, it is just the impetus of his compassion. His mercy is towards all people. It is inspired by our human weakness and helplessness. God helps us, as he did King David, when we are in distress. King David said 'let us fall into the hands of God because he is merciful' (1 Chronicles 21:13). All through Scripture we read that God is rich in mercy (Ephesians 2:4), generous and lavish in love and mercy (Ephesians 1:8; 1 John 3:1) and that his mercies never end (Lamentations 3:22). His mercy flows from his throne of grace not in stingy drips but as a constant, gushing outpouring flowing from his heart of infinite loving-kindness and compassion towards all he has made.

We experience God's mercy in a deeply moving & personal way as in Psalm 23, 'Surely goodness & loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever'. God has supremely shown his mercy to us in the giving of his Son, Jesus Christ, to the manger and to the cross to be our living Saviour. *'The crowning jewel of God's mercy came in the form of a man named Jesus.'*

The definition of mercy also included the phrase – *'Mercy is an active word, if the emotion does not result in action, it is not mercy.'*

As a church we are not only reflecting deeply on the mercy of God but also on what it means for us in terms of action. Studying God's mercy is not like learning about Henry VIII or the properties of plutonium as unconnected facts that do not involve us. This is not about achievement but about formation. By exploring this subject we enter into a holistic heart experience that involves us changing and growing in grace and in the knowledge of God. Not only do we receive God's mercy but this is then the motivation and inspiration both for how we live and the way we in turn show mercy to others. Jesus said, 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36).

And the Lord has told us how he wants us to live in Micah 6:8, 'He has showed you, O people, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' This verse is translated in *The Message* (a modern interpretation), 'He's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.'

'Taking God Seriously' is our theme for the Sundays of Lent 2016. Lent has traditionally been a period from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday (40 days) of fasting and self-denial in commemoration of Christ's fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1,2). In recent times it has become as much, if not more, about what we actively take on rather than what we take out of our lives. The real aim of Lent is to prepare people for the celebration of the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The better the preparation the more effective the celebration will be. So it is perhaps best understood as a period of dynamic engagement with God. It might mean fasting and self-denial but it certainly involves prayer, contemplation, self-examination and an intentional seeking after God. In other words, taking God seriously.

Each week we will be reflecting on a passage of Scripture that explores different facets of the mercy of God. There will be readings and suggested topics for discussion/personal reflection.

Please contact us at

88 High Street, Knaphill, GU21 2PZ

01483 474083 or

minister@knaphillbaptist.org.uk

www.KnaphillBaptist.org.uk

This can then be followed by a time of prayer and response asking the questions, 'What does this mean for me?' and 'What can I do?'

The session could be opened with the words said together:

**Give thanks to the Lord
For his mercy lasts forever**

This could be followed by a time of silent reflection leading into a time of prayerful thanksgiving for the signs of God's mercy in our lives, our community and our world.

The session could end by sharing the words of Jude 2 together:

Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance

For these studies I have perused the *Year of Mercy Lent Course* material from the Diocese of Chichester and the *Year of Mercy Lent Course* from the Catholic Diocese of Arundel & Brighton which you might like to read for yourselves. I have also looked at the following books which I recommend: -

Exploring God's Mercy by Steven Croft
Barefoot Disciple by Stephen Cherry
Run with the Horses by Eugene Peterson

LOVING MERCY WEEK 5: ACTING JUSTLY

Read Matthew 25:31-46

Commenting on Matthew 25, Pope Francis says: 'We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison ... if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer. In each of these "little ones," Christ himself is present.' *Misericordiae Vultus*, 15

This is a hard calling, and apart from God's grace, an impossible one. But the truth remains we are called to be agents of God's mercy, helping *all* those in need. Jesus is not expecting his disciples to become part of a withdrawn sect, simply caring for one another. He wants his followers to go out into the world with joy and a real desire to serve the world and its needs in his name.

Questions and pointers for discussion/reflection

1. Is it a joy for you to serve the Lord? Do you feel being a Christian is a duty or chore? If so, what might be the remedy?
2. *The Message* translation of Micah 6:8 reads - 'He's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love. Acting justly can also be understood as doing what is right. What situations have you been in or are now in where you are struggling to do what is right? How might a deeper sense of God's mercy help you?
3. What is the Lord calling you to do in response to this reading?
4. What insights about God's mercy are you taking away from this session and from this course?

LOVING MERCY WEEK 4: LIVING GENEROUSLY

Read Romans 12:1-21

In Eugene Peterson's *The Message* Micah 6:8 reads 'Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.' Lent is a good time to take stock of ourselves, to test our spiritual temperature – are we hot or cold? Are we taking ourselves too seriously and not taking God seriously enough? Eugene Peterson's book *Run with the Horses* begins 'The puzzle is why so many people live so badly. Not so wickedly, but so inately. Not so cruelly but so stupidly.' And this can be just as true of us Christians. Like Micah 6:8, this passage is eminently practical. It lays out quite clearly how God wants us to live. Our God is a generous God and he wants us to live generous lives, giving of ourselves and all that God has given us generously for others. What can be learnt about living generously from the following Scriptures: - Proverbs 11:25, 22:9; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; 2 Corinthians 9:6-11; Colossians 3:7,23,24, 1 Peter 4:7-11

Questions and pointers for discussion/reflection

1. How do you feel about verse 3? Are you too hard or too soft on yourself? Do you take yourself too seriously? In what ways could you live and give more generously?
2. There is a list of gifts here (not an exclusive one). What are your God given gifts? Are you using them generously to serve the Lord in the church and in the world for his glory?
3. In verse 12 we read that we are to be joyful, patient, prayerful, faithful and sharing. Does this describe you? Where do you need to improve? How can you do so?
4. Do you show mercy to others cheerfully (verse 8)?
5. Practising hospitality (verse 13) is a hallmark of Christian living. How can we all be more hospitable? Could we use our homes more as opportunities for generous living?
6. What did you learn from last Sunday's sermon about living generously and what insights about God's mercy are you taking away from this session?

LOVING MERCY WEEK 1: WALKING HUMBLY

Read Mark 10:35-52. This passage contrasts two very different responses to the same question from Jesus. First we hear from two disciples, members of 'the twelve' (James and John) and then from Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. If the disciples had been taking notes in earlier 'sessions' on the true meaning of following Jesus, they might have looked something like this:

- We are to deny ourselves for Jesus' sake and the sake of the Gospel (8.34-38)
- We are to be focussed on Jesus and his words above all else (9.7)
- We are in humility to remain dependent on God's power and not our own (9.14-29)
- We are not to seek glory for ourselves, but rather to be servants of all (9.33-37)
- We are not the only ones through whom God is working (10.38-41)
- We are not to let possessions or anything else get in the way of discipleship (10.17-31)

Questions and pointers for discussion/reflection

1. Jesus asks the same question (vs 36,51). In the light of these lessons about following Jesus, consider the different motivation of the disciples and Bartimaeus.
2. Bartimaeus asked for mercy and received it. Identify a time in your life when you have experienced the mercy of God.
3. What would you like Jesus to do for you today? As an individual? As a church? And what do you think Jesus would most like you to ask him to do?
4. It has been suggested that the church must be an 'oasis of mercy' because the practice of mercy is waning in our culture. Can identify aspects of our society that might bear this out?
5. How might the church truly become an 'oasis of mercy'?
6. What did you learn from last Sunday's sermon about walking humbly with God and what insights about God's mercy are you taking away from this session?

LOVING MERCY WEEK 2: BEING WILLING

Read Hosea 6:1-6

The Old Testament book of Hosea is the first of 12 minor prophets. Hosea lived in the final days of the northern kingdom of Israel before they were invaded by Assyria. God called Hosea to marry someone who was unfaithful to him, Gomer. This rather tortuous relationship forms the basis for God speaking to and through Hosea, because it represents Israel's spiritual adultery, their disloyalty to God. Verse 6 tells us that what God wants from us is a willingness to live the way he wants us to, and not just perform or play pretend or go through the motions in empty ritual or mere religious formalism. The word 'mercy' in this verse is the rich and powerful Hebrew word '*hesed*'. It is one of the great Biblical concepts and consequently very difficult to translate. No single word captures its full meaning. As well as mercy it is made up of kindness, steadfast love, loyalty, faithfulness, respect. It describes the caring responsibility with which people are to treat each other because that is the way God treats us.

Questions and pointers for discussion/reflection

1. What does this passage show us about God's mercy?
2. In Hosea's day, the people were not willing to live the way God wanted, treating others with the opposite of *hesed* and they reaped the consequences. What are the consequences for us if we are not willing? Do we ever slip into empty ritual or religious formalism as a church? How can this be avoided?
3. King David prayed '[Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me](#)' (Psalm 51:12). Can you pray 'Lord, make me willing'? Are you struggling with anything or anyone? Do you need to pray 'Lord, make me willing to be willing' as a first step?
4. In the light of Hosea 6:6, have a look at Matthew 21:28-31.
5. *Hesed* is not something we feel, but something we do?
6. What did you learn from last Sunday's sermon about being willing? What insights about God's mercy are you taking away from this session?

LOVING MERCY WEEK 3: BEING FRUITFUL

Read Psalm 107:33-42

The theme of this Psalm gives us an image of God's mercy and salvation. It is of the barren becoming fruitful: the image of the good and abundant life. I once preached a sermon on 'The Fecundity of God' which was about the generous, productive fruitfulness of God. Scripture tells us that God is rich in mercy, lavish in his love and grace towards all he has made. Jesus said '[Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measure to you](#)' (Matthew 6:38). We are to reflect the nature of God to the world by living fruitful, generous, productive lives ourselves.

Also consider the following Scriptures: -

Matthew 3:8-10; Matthew 7:17-20; Matthew 12:33; John 15:1-8; Romans 7:4; Colossians 1:10; Galatians 5:22

Make a list of what the word 'fruit' means in these verses.

Questions and pointers for discussion/reflection

1. This section of the Psalm speaks of spiritual dryness and fruitlessness. Have you ever felt dry barren in your walk with God? What changed for you? Or do you feel like that now?
2. Is any part of your life that is not bearing fruit for God and needs to be removed?
3. When we cry to God honestly from our hearts good things can start to happen as God waters our barren lives to make them fruitful. What does this say about God's mercy?
4. What difference does it make to your Christian journey that God intends your life to bear fruit?
5. Have you known seasons of fruitfulness in your Christian life and experienced the full life Jesus speaks of in John 10:10?
6. What do you need to do to develop a fruitful, abundant life?
7. What did you learn from last Sunday's sermon about being fruitful for God and what insights about God's mercy are you taking away from this session?