



Bible
Society

Summer 2016

The Bible in Transmission

A forum for change in church and culture



Mercy

Contents

With thanks to The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London for their permission to reproduce P.1978. PG.48 Bruegel, Pieter, the elder (c.1525/30-1569): Christ and the woman taken in adultery, 1565. Oil on panel, 24.1 x 34.4 cm

©Ivonne Wierink/
Fotolia.com;
©iStockphoto.
com/alexey;
©iStockphoto.
com/BCFC;
©iStockphoto.
com/Andrew
Howe;
©iStockphoto.
com/mbolina;
©iStockphoto.
com/
bernie_photo;
©iStockphoto.
com/
characterdesign;
©iStockphoto.
com/serggn

- 3 Editorial**
Chine McDonald
- 5 Lord, have mercy: Lamentations and the gift of prayer**
Heath Thomas
- 9 Our merciful God**
HE Cardinal Vincent Nichols
- 12 Mercy and the year of Jubilee**
Guy Brandon
- 15 Mercy and rehabilitation**
Sara Hyde
- 18 Law, justice and mercy in the justice system**
Jeremy Cooke
- 21 'Let anyone of you who is without sin ...'**
Marijke Hoek
- 24 Showing mercy: Lessons from *The Merchant of Venice***
Linzy Brady
- 27 News from Bible Society**
Paul Woolley



Editorial



Chine McDonald

Chine McDonald is Director of Communications at the Evangelical Alliance.

The musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's nineteenth century masterpiece – *Les Misérables* – never fails to make me weep. It is a breath-taking demonstration of the transformative and redeeming power of mercy. For those unfamiliar with the plot, the story begins when Jean Valjean – a destitute convict on parole – is taken in by a bishop who lavishes him with love, providing food for him and a bed for the night. Stunned by this hospitality, yet seeing an opportunity, Valjean makes off with the priest's silver in the night. The following day, he is caught by police and marched back to the priest to confirm that the silverware does in fact belong to him. Faced with the choice of whether to seek justice or show mercy, the man of God chooses to tell the constables that the possessions were in fact a gift to Valjean.

But with this act of mercy comes responsibility. In words that are to change Valjean's life, the priest asks him to see this as part of what God has planned for his life. He urges him to use the silver for good. Like so many who are the recipients of mercy, Valjean is confused by it. It makes no sense. 'Take an eye for an eye! Turn your heart into stone! This is all I have lived for! This is all I have known!' he cries. 'One word from him and I'd be back beneath the lash, upon the rack. Instead he offers me my freedom, I feel my shame inside me like a knife. He told me that I have a soul. How does he know?' It's at that moment that he decides: 'Another story has begun.'

This story is a beautiful illustration of the mercy and loving kindness that God has towards us. We

read in Psalm 103.10–12: 'He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.'

In reflecting on the theme of mercy, I have been reminded that mercy cannot exist without justice. Jean Valjean would not have been the recipient of mercy if he had not faced the prospect of justice for the crime he had committed.

In the Prince's Chamber in the Palace of Westminster, you will find a large white marble statue of Queen Victoria. She holds in her hands a sceptre and laurel crown. Either side of her are the figures of Justice – who holds a sword and balance – and Mercy; depicted here by an olive branch. The statue personifies the biblical view of government – that you can't have justice without mercy and vice versa; in fact, the two define each other. The two are also found in God – he alone, in his perfect holiness, is both just and merciful.

In this edition, we explore the theme of mercy from a number of different angles – from the Jubilee year to *The Merchant of Venice* and the criminal justice system.

There are many words that can be translated as mercy in the Hebrew Old Testament but possibly the most theologically significant is the Hebrew word *hesed*. This stands as one of the key, covenant ideas in the Old Testament, telling about the nature of the relationship between God and humanity. Guy

Brandon explains how the concept of *hesed* is far broader than the idea of forgiveness or being 'let off'. Instead, he writes, *hesed* refers to an overarching ethic in the Bible of God's lovingkindness or 'covenant love'. It is that steadfast, never-failing love of God that is associated with the purpose of the debt relief and reset of the financial system during the Jubilee year.

It is in the incarnation that both God's justice and his mercy are displayed. Because of Christ's life, death and resurrection, our sins that are deserving of God's justice are washed away because of his mercy. What an amazing truth that is. But as people shown the ultimate mercy, we are called – like Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* – to do something with it; this mercy transforms us and transforms others. 'But for that very reason, I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life' (1 Timothy 1.16).

The interplay between justice and mercy find their way into a number of the articles in this edition. Dr Linzy Brady – honorary research associate in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney – looks at the portrayals of mercy and kinds of mercy shown to Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Here we are reminded of the difference between a self-righteous mercy that

can be doled out by flawed humans and God's divine justice, 'tempered with mercy and grace'.

You may spot a few mentions of that oft-quoted passage from Micah 6.8: 'He has showed you, O man, 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.' Both Sir Jeremy Cooke, a former judge at the Queen's Bench in the High Court, and Sara Hyde, a campaigner within the criminal justice system, cite this passage in their very different perspectives on the law, justice and mercy.

'The justice system of any country ... has little room for mercy in its concern for the achievement of justice,' Sir Jeremy writes. While Sara asks how mercy can be a part of state-run institutions, while justice still reigns. 'The punishment is deprivation of liberty, not additional hardship once inside,' she writes.

For Marijke Hoek, mercy can help to define the 'character of our justice'. In this edition, she explores the mercy Jesus shows as he comes alongside the woman 'taken in adultery' in John's Gospel. She demonstrates the restorative power of mercy in the lives of broken people who are full of shame.

I hope that as you read these various reflections on mercy that you – like me – will be left with much to ponder; but also that you will be re-awakened to the jaw-dropping beauty of God's mercy in each of our lives.



Bringing the Bible to Life

Bible Sunday

23 October 2016 or any Sunday of your choice

Will you and your church take up the challenge and celebrate Bible Sunday with our free resources?

- Simple ways to bring the Bible to life in your community
- Free resources available for your Bible Sunday church service

Registered charity 232759 Bible Society, Stonehill Green, Westlea, Swindon SN5 7DG To find out more visit biblesunday.org.uk

Lord, have mercy: Lamentations and the gift of prayer



**Heath A
Thomas**

Dr Heath Thomas is Dean, College of Theology and Ministry, Associate Vice President for Church Relations and Professor of Old Testament at Oklahoma Baptist University.

In the Christian tradition, the cry of *kyrie eleison* or 'Lord, have mercy' has resounded in the liturgy of the Church at least since the fourth century AD. It is the Church's prayer for help and mercy from the Lord in their straits of suffering and sin. This traditional prayer goes back to the psalter (e.g. Psalms 4.2; 6.3; 9.13) and the New Testament as well (Matthew 9.27; 20.30; Mark 10.47). In this light, it is clear that God's mercy is an important focus for Scripture and the Christian faith.

God's mercy is important for the book of Lamentations as well. It has been common in the past to focus upon the statements of sin and God's just punishment in Lamentations as the message of the book (Lamentations 1.5, 8, 14, 18; 3.42; 4.13; 5.16). On this construction, the mercy of God is evident in that God's people are not fully wiped out in divine judgement. God has preserved a remnant and will accomplish his purposes through his people despite their sin. Recently, however, it has been common to focus upon other perspectives in Lamentations to gain access to the meaning of the book, namely statements of suffering, of the plight of children and women in the book, of the prayers for help against enemies, and for prayers for God to stop his punishment against the people (Lamentations 1.2–4, 7, 10–11, 20–22; 2.1–22; 3.1–20; 3.43–66; 4.1–12; 5.1–15, 17–22). On this construction, God's people call upon him to notice their affliction, and out of his mercy, act on their behalf.

This article will explore the mercy of God in the book of Lamentations. While God's mercy is

affirmed in creedal affirmation (particularly Lamentations 3.21–24), I shall argue that Lamentations launches from this creedal affirmation of God's mercy to cry out in the spirit of prayer: *kyrie eleison!* This will become a model for the Church today, who struggles and suffers in sin and pain. To get there, however, it will be useful to get a handle on the brief but underexplored book of Lamentations.

Lamentations in the Bible

Measured against any standard, Lamentations stands out as a literary masterpiece. Each of the poems deal with experiences of confusion that all too often mark the human experience: suffering and sin, guilt, blame, penitence and protest. Lamentations speaks to human suffering and the dark experiences of life in a manner unparalleled in the Old Testament. It is one of the only books, if not the only book, in the Bible without a 'happy ending'.

The New Testament over and over again recognises and mourns suffering but looks towards the resurrection hope in Jesus. Although Good Friday moments recur in the New Testament, the reality of Easter Sunday provides a hope for the suffering Church that her resurrection day will come as well. The shape of the New Testament concludes with the apocalypse of John, with a new heaven and a new earth, where the glorified Jesus sits on the throne and cries out: 'See, I am making all things new' (Revelation 21.5 NRSV).

NOTES

1. TE Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 302.
2. WC Kaiser, Jr., *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God: Christian Assurance and the Message of Lamentations* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publishers, 2004), p. 81.
3. HA Thomas, *'Until He Looks Down and Sees': The Message and Meaning of the Book of Lamentations* (GBS 53; Cambridge, UK: Grove Books, 2009), p. 16.
4. J Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* (trans. C. Edward Hopkin; New York: Seabury Press, 1970), p. 133.
5. DB Clendenin (ed.), *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), p. 7.
6. R Parry, *Lamentations* (THOTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 217.

One might think the Old Testament books are different and are less happy and hope-filled, but even there bright rays shine in the darkest of books. The book attributed to the 'weeping prophet' Jeremiah concludes bleakly, but readers grasp a grand vision of hope and restoration in Jeremiah 30–33. In the little book of consolation, God speaks his word of forgiveness, giving a picture of the coming new covenant (Jeremiah 31). This picture provides the suffering follower of God the grounds for hope, despite pain in the present. And what of the psalter? Surely it is bleak. After all, it contains the greatest number of lament prayers in the Bible. Indeed, there are more lament psalms than there are praise psalms or hymns. Even the psalter concludes with a happy ending: a rousing crescendo of praise in Psalms 146–50. The hallelujahs of these psalms reveal that lament has been turned to praise. Another dark prophetic book emphasises the point. The prophet Habakkuk's dark cry of 'how long?' in chapter 1 concludes with bright praise in chapter 3. Lament breaks into praise as the prophet boldly affirms:

Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places.

(Habakkuk 3.17–19, ESV).

The prophet Habakkuk experiences joy through pain, giving hope for believers that suffering is not the final word on the life of faith. As this brief survey reveals, even the dark books in the Bible see luminous rays of hope. But what of Lamentations? The entirety of the book may seem too gloomy for the bright halls of biblical faith.

Lamentations and the mercy of God

For good reason, the modern Christian imagination has been captured by the third poem of Lamentations that highlights the mercy of God. Note particularly Lamentations 3.21–24 (ESV):

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
"The LORD is my portion", says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

The beauty of these verses lay in their creedal affirmation of the covenant-character traits of

YHWH, Israel's God. The Hebrew terms 'steadfast love' (*hesed*), 'mercy' (*rekhem*), and 'faithfulness' (*emunah*) appear here in 3.22–24 and recall the same language that YHWH uses of himself after after Israel committed grave sin with the golden calf in the wilderness, recorded in Exodus 34.6–7.

Lamentations speaks to human suffering and the dark experiences of life in a manner unparalleled in the Old Testament

After judgement, God appears to Moses and reveals his character in a creed that is repeated and received throughout the Old Testament. The verses affirm YHWH is a God who is 'merciful' (*rekhem*) and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in 'steadfast love' (*hesed*) and 'faithfulness' (*emunah*). The point of the revelation of YHWH's character in Exodus is to emphasise that although Israel sins, God's 'mercy' (*rekhem*) would remain. Terence Fretheim says the creedal affirmation of Exodus 34.6–7 exclaims YHWH's 'divine mercy and forgiveness and patience' that is matched with an unconditional love for Israel.¹ Although Israel has sinned, God's mercy is new like the morning. It is no wonder, then, that Lamentations 3.22–24 picks up this language. It comforts those who receive Lamentations as they experience pain. It reminds them that all is not lost. Both texts testify that God is still the covenant Lord of Israel, and his mercies will break forth as the morning light.

Walter Kaiser characterises Lamentations 3.22–24 as 'a pool of light in the midst of thickest darkness' and the chapter provides the deepest consolation and presentation of YHWH.² The verses then are the theological high point of the book and the creed that the readers must embrace. It is not too much to say that Kaiser's perspective is emblematic of much of Lamentations' interpretation amongst those who have read and received the book, particularly in Christian circles. Yet more needs to be said about these verses and their theological affirmation.

The prayers and tears of Lamentations

Lamentations 3, along with the beautiful pronouncement of verses 21–24, must be heard in concert with the prayers and tears of Lamentations. A careful reader notes that when one reads Lamentations 3 closely, one sees a structure that moves through:

- a. Suffering and lament (vv. 1–20)
- b. The creedal affirmation of YHWH (vv. 21–24)
- c. A teaching on suffering and sin (vv. 25–39)
- d. A return to lament prayer (vv. 40–66)

In this way, one cannot lodge at (b) for too long. The poetry does not allow the reader to stop at the 'pool of light' but returns to darkness, suffering and prayer. In other words, the poem ends on plea rather than praise, and it returns to lament rather than resting in victory.

Because of the movement of Lamentations 3, the poem profiles the cry for mercy and the anticipation of divine help rather than teaching a simple creedal affirmation of the character of God. God may be the source of hope, as verse 24 indicates, but suffering and prayer remain. The people cry out for God's mercy rather than simply affirming it. An important section of this chapter confirms this point:

My eyes will flow without ceasing,
without respite,
until the LORD from heaven
looks down and sees;
my eyes cause me grief
at the fate of all the daughters of my city.

(Lamentations 3.49–51, ESV)

God reveals his mercy most fully in the work of Jesus the Messiah

The people of God cry out until God looks down and acts out of his mercy. These verses affirm a theology of the mercy of God in line with Lamentations 3.21–24, to be sure, but they do so in a way that anticipates God's mercy in the future rather than experiences God's mercy in the past. It is a theological position that prays for God's mercy to be real in the real world. The mercies of God are 'peeking around the corner' without running to meet the plight of God's people.³ Until he does, God's people will cry out from the depths of their souls. Hope in God in Lamentations is real, but it is articulated primarily in and through prayer. Prayer, then, becomes a fecund way to receive and interpret the book of Lamentations for today.

Prayer is a way to engage the God who made a needful humanity. Jacques Ellul helpfully describes prayer as a kind of dialogue between God and humanity, which 'implies reserve, tension, contradiction, argument back and forth'.⁴ Although the prayers of Lamentations do not provide God's side of the dialogue, we certainly hear the 'tension' and 'contradiction' in the voices of those who pray in the book. This helps us see that for Lamentations, prayer is the primary grammar for expressing faith.

So to understand Lamentations' perspective on God and his mercy, we must look to the prayers of the book rather than the 'pool of light' found in Lamentations 3.21–24. Prayers reveal faith, or as Pope Celestine 1 famously said: '*Lex orandi est lex credendi et agendi*' ('the law of prayer is the law

of belief and action'). His words emphasise the primacy of worship and prayer beyond rationalistic belief. In other words, if you want to know what one believes about God, then look to see how and what one prays, and how those prayers animate the life of faith. Lamentations reveals a people that believe in the God of mercy but express that faith in prayer alongside the creedal affirmation in Lamentations 3.21–24.⁵

Those central verses in Lamentations affirm the doctrine that God is merciful, in line with Exodus 34.6–7. But we should remember how Lamentations employs the creedal affirmation. As one observes the shape of Lamentations 3, the creedal affirmation serves as a kind of launching pad into prayer. Stated another way, Lamentations' firm belief in the mercy of God generates more and more tears and more and more prayer in the book. God is merciful, the affirmation goes, so pray without ceasing.

Praying for God's mercy

Lamentations 3.49–51 draw us to the persistence of prayer in the book. These verses evocatively portray a person worn out from weeping over the suffering of others ('all the daughters of my city'). It is a parental image of loss and an experience of deep empathy with the sufferer. The poet cries unceasingly in compassion for those in pain: 'My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite' (Lam 3.49). Love and concern for another motivates prayer to God until he looks down and perceives the sad state of the 'daughters' of the city.

Only when God notices will these prayers be turned to praise and these tears turned to laughter: 'Until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees' (Lam 3.50). Robin Parry captures the perspective of Lamentations' cries for God's mercy. He says that Lamentations' scenes of suffering, including Lamentations 3.49–51, are there

not merely because the people need to speak their pain, but mainly because the underlying hope is that YHWH is fundamentally a God of compassion: if his attention is drawn to the dreadful suffering, then, it was hoped he will be moved to act salvifically. Even the articulation of complaint is a step out of the darkness.⁶

The hope in the cries of Lamentations is that God would be moved to act, precisely because YHWH was and is a merciful God! Although Parry rightly notes that the book affirms God's compassion, not all the prayers for God's mercy are the same. The book highlights prayers for relief from enemies, forgiveness of Israel's sins, and even relief from God's adversarial action against his people and city. In each of the prayers uttered, God's people request his mercy to be made real in their experience.

For the Church today, it is entirely helpful to learn from Lamentations' cries for mercy in and through prayer. The words of Lamentations become a

kind of script that the Church might perform in many ways. God's people cry out to him for mercy because of their sin, their suffering, or their persecution and oppression. God's people cry out for mercy when they experience what can only be a kind of disruption in their relationship with their Lord. Such prayers are not empty words: they are the very words of life that God has given us to speak in our destitution, and that is a wonderful gift. Lamentations becomes the vocabulary and grammar for the Church to cry out: *kyrie eleison!*

Conclusion

God's compassion is revealed in Lamentations 3.21–24, where the poet confirms that YHWH's mercies are 'new every morning'. That creedal affirmation is given a particular shape in the prayers of the book. Because God is merciful, he will respond to the prayers of his people. In this way, prayer becomes the vehicle for faithfulness. If one wants to see faith on display in Lamentations, then one should look to the faithful prayers of penitence, protest and pain. They will persist 'until he looks down and sees'. God does respond to their cries for mercy, because he is merciful.

In the full sweep of Christian Scripture, God reveals his mercy most fully in the work of Jesus the Messiah, who forgives sins, liberates the captive, and will make all things new. Recognising the centrality of Jesus, the Christian Church has used the book of Lamentations during Lent, particularly during Holy Week. Lamentations becomes a text that enables God's people to voice sin, suffering, pain, and loss. But it does so by refracting its pain and prayers through the suffering and passion of Jesus. Our suffering, pain and sin is put on Christ's shoulders and he bears them all. Easter Sunday testifies that God answers suffering, sin and even death with new life. The Lord's mercies radiantly become new on the resurrection morning of Christ. This reality does not stop our prayers, however. It drives us to pray ever more fervently because of the mercy of God in Christ. It drives us to pray in the words of Lamentations and the words of Revelation:

My eyes will flow without ceasing,
without relief,
until the LORD looks down
from heaven and sees.

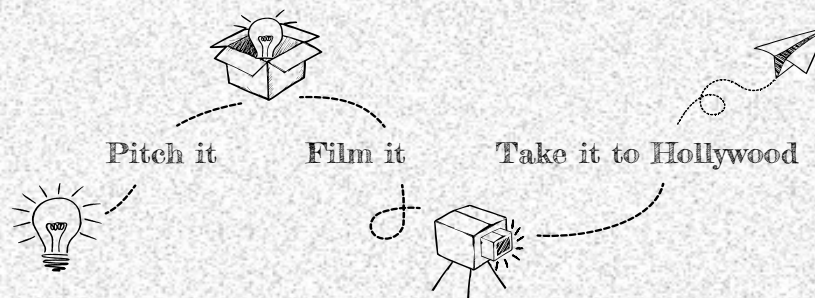
(Lamentations 3.49–50)

'Come quickly Lord Jesus!' (Rev 22.20).

The Pitch

Adapting the Scriptures for film

- Industry jury and top professional support
- £25,000 production budget
- Network for winners in LA
- Now inviting submissions for 2016 competition



Closing date for submissions 10 October 2016

enterthepitch.com

Our merciful God



HE Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Vincent Nichols is the 11th Archbishop of Westminster. He has an Honorary Doctoral Degree from Birmingham University and an Honorary Doctorate of divinity from Liverpool Hope University. He is the first Chancellor of St Mary's University, Twickenham and is Vice-President of Bible Society.

If a parent forgives a child for breaking something it's not just an act of forgiveness, it's the loving relationship which makes it possible, and forgiveness is the expression of that prior relationship. Or people may forgive someone with whom they have no relationship, but on the basis of their relationship with God. Take the parents of Jimmy Mizen. Jimmy was a 16-year-old schoolboy who was murdered on 10 May 2008 in London. They forgave his murderer. They had no prior relationship with him, but had a relationship with Christ and a forgiving spirit. So the act of mercy is to do with the character of the Person. Mercy is one of the defining features of God's character as revealed in the Scriptures.

The Old Testament Hebrew word most usually translated as mercy is *hesed*. It is also translated 'love' or perhaps better still 'loving kindness'. Various translations of the first verse of Psalm 118 help us see the depth of this word:

Douai Rheims Give praise to the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.

King James O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: because his mercy endureth for ever.

New Jerusalem Bible Alleluia! Give thanks to Yahweh for he is good, for his faithful love endures for ever.

RSV O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures for ever!

GRAIL O give thanks to the Lord for he is good for his love endures for ever.

Very often *hesed* is put together with the word *emet*, truth or constancy. For instance, when God passes before Moses in Exodus 34.6 he exclaims:

Douai Rheims And when he passed before him, he said: O the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, patient and of much compassion, and true.

King James And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.

RSV The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.'

So these two words love and truth, or mercy and faithfulness are the defining characteristics of God. In himself God is love, but as sinners we experience that love most often as mercy. The Hebrew word *hesed* is translated in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, usually by the Greek word *eleos* from which comes the expression we use in the liturgy *kyrie eleison*, 'Lord, have mercy'. That's much more than just a prayer for God to forgive us our sins, but for God to show all his goodness, love and kindness to us. It's used much more in the eastern rites in the Orthodox and eastern Catholic churches as the response to various litanies and to their equivalent of the bidding prayers or the prayer of the faithful.

This word *eleos* has the same ultimate root as the old Greek word for oil, *elaion* or more precisely, olive oil; a substance which was used extensively as a soothing agent for bruises and minor wounds.

NOTES

1. We know the sabbatical years were observed.

For instance, 1 Maccabees 6 says of the town of Beth-Zur: 'It lacked store of provisions to withstand a siege, since the land was enjoying a sabbatical year.' This is about the year 163 BC.

2. Jesus is probably referring to Genesis 4.23–24 where Lamech says to his wives, 'I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Sevenfold vengeance for Cain, but seventy-sevenfold for Lamech.'

So when we pray 'kyrie eleison', 'Lord, have mercy', we are saying something like: 'Lord, soothe me, comfort me, take away my pain, show me your steadfast love.' Also, of course, 'take away my sin'.

The Jesus Prayer, another of the most precious prayers of the Orthodox Church, claims nothing but God's mercy: 'Lord Jesus, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

God's mercy means if I really want God and a relationship with him, nothing need come between us but if I'm looking for an easy way, if I want to be able to ignore God and his commandments but still remain on good terms with him, that's just not on offer. If I want to stay in his good books while at the same time basically avoiding him, that's not available. Mercy is about relationship.

Mercy only makes sense when we recognise we are sinners. Often people today don't want forgiveness, but a declaration of innocence; they want everything they do to be condoned. God has never offered that kind of fake mercy. God's mercy always involves the recognition of our wrongdoing and then its forgiveness.

Perhaps the opposite to mercy is karma, the idea that for every good deed there is a precise, commensurate reward and for every bad deed there is a precise, commensurate punishment. It's quite popular, quite attractive in some ways and I've known Catholics who subscribe to it. But it is merciless, hard and has no place in the Christian scheme of things. The old translation of Eucharistic Prayer One had the line: 'Do not consider what we truly deserve, but grant us your forgiveness through Christ our Lord.' This expresses very well the difference between karma and mercy.

The Scriptures are full of God's mercy from beginning to end. Here I'd like to look at some of the less obvious places where his mercy is proclaimed.

The Jubilee

In Leviticus 25, we find a body of legislation designed to give practical direction about the all-important question of land. First of all, every seventh year there is to be a year of rest for the land, for slaves, employees and even animals (verses 4–7). There are sound ecological principles and good human common sense at work here. This sort of thing was not unknown elsewhere in the Near East. But, this was a Sabbath for the Lord. It was a recognition that ultimately we own nothing and nobody, that they are all God's and no one may assume that they have rights over anything or anybody in perpetuity.¹ In addition to this there was to be jubilee every 49 years (verses 8–16). All debts had to be forgiven, slaves accumulated over the 49 years were to be set free, and land accumulated was to be redistributed. If a man went bankrupt the year after the jubilee and sold himself into slavery, he would be a slave for up to 48 years, unless a relative was able to redeem him. If that happened later in the cycle, then he would

have a shorter period as a slave. Thus, roughly once in everybody's lifetime the slate was wiped clean. This is all about how people deal with each other, but underlying it is the concept of mercy, the idea that we always give someone another chance since that is the very nature of God.

The cities of refuge

Numbers 35.11–34 speaks of cities of refuge where people who have committed manslaughter could take refuge. As in some countries now, if a person accidentally killed someone, a mob would immediately kill him. This was not to happen, once again there was to be no mob justice. There is a notion running through the whole Bible that there is always a way out for people. God never wants people to be trapped in a situation from which there is no escape. The jubilee year is just that. Jesus made this much more explicit in his ministry to sinners.

Jonah – a back to front, inside-out story of God's mercy

The popular 1960s' sit-com *'Til Death Us Do Part* had as its main character Alf Garnett, an unpleasant loud mouthed, right-wing, bigoted racist. The point of the series was not to make him a hero, but to lampoon him, to show how ridiculous such attitudes as his are. The author of Jonah does something rather similar. He writes at a time when there was a tendency in Judah for people to become exclusivist and narrow-minded, to limit God's love and mercy only to people like them of their own race and religion, and to see all outsiders as a threat. This is a tendency for many groups, both religious and otherwise. Jesus is very much up against these sorts of attitudes in the religious leaders of his time. Jonah embodies the attitudes which the author wishes to challenge.

Jonah is told to preach repentance to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, one of Israel's greatest enemies. He refuses and takes a ship in the opposite direction because he doesn't want Nineveh to be spared. He wants them to be destroyed but knows that God is merciful so sees to it that they don't get the chance to repent into the hands of this merciful God.

The overall burden of the book is that Jonah's small mind reveals God's big heart. Eventually he is vomited up on the shore. God tells him once again to go and proclaim the message he has been given. Jonah, realising that resistance is futile, decides to go ahead and preach, and gives what must be the very worst homily in the history of preaching. 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' (3.4). This homily is calculated to fail. Jonah preaches like this because he wants the Ninevites to ignore him, he doesn't want them to repent. Much to his dismay we read: 'And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth' (3.5). The king issues a decree that even the animals are to be covered in sackcloth!

On seeing this Jonah goes and lies down outside the city, so angry that he wants to die and asks God to take his life. He tells God that he knew this would happen: 'That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (4.2). Jonah would sooner die than live in a world where God loves his enemies. He is in much greater need of conversion than the Ninevites. Just because he is one of God's people does not mean automatically that he is obedient to God and just because the Ninevites are pagans does not mean that they ignore him, in fact they are portrayed here as much better examples of faith than Jonah, even though he's a prophet.

Jonah is a caricature of the narrow-minded people of his time who don't want God to save anyone else. In fact, implies the author, they are the ones who are running from God and the pagans are much more open to him than they. It speaks as clearly to narrow religious exclusivism now as it did then.

There are two streams of thought concerning the nations, the Gentiles in post-exilic Judaism. On the one hand, Ezra and Nehemiah want to define ever more tightly and narrowly who God's people are and their answer is basically 'only people who are like us'. There are, to be fair, good reasons for that. On the other hand, books like Jonah, Ruth and the third part of Isaiah (56—66) are trying to say that God is much bigger and much more inclusive and merciful to all than we could ever imagine. It's the honesty of the final compilers of the Old Testament – we would say inspiration – that they leave both of these opinions side by side. The Old Testament moves inexorably to the conclusion that the salvation promised to Abraham is indeed for all people. Jesus, in trying to put across a more all-embracing understanding of God's love and mercy was not inventing something new, he was trying to bring out the deepest truth of Judaism, a truth was being obscured by religious narrow-mindedness. The book of Jonah presents us with that struggle in story form. One of the main plotlines in the Old Testament is the way people's understanding of God develops from a tribal deity among others to the only God, Lord of the whole earth and all peoples. We see that come to fruition in Acts 10.34 when Peter, about to baptise the pagan Cornelius says: 'I now really understand that God has no favourites.' He thereby opens the Church and so God's mercy to the Gentiles. Jonah is one of the major stepping stones on the way.

The unforgiving debtor

Let's finish by looking at one of Jesus' many parables of mercy, one of the many places he makes it clear how abundant God's mercy is and how important it is for us to share it. We all know the parable of the unforgiving debtor in Matthew 18.23–35. It would be clear to anyone who heard Jesus say this that the man could not pay back

10,000 talents. It's the equivalent of billions in today's money. It's not a debt that could ever become manageable or consolidated. No amount of counselling or financial advice could ever make this better. And it's not plausible that a king would ever lend a slave that amount. Jesus sets up a situation in which it seems there is no way out.

So the king decides to be creative. He could let this bad situation go on indefinitely, but the only solution is just to forget the whole thing. He creates a new possibility, and both of them can get on with their lives and be on good terms.

This slave is in turn owed 100 denarii. That's a hundred days wages for an unskilled labourer. This man has every right to demand the money, but because of the king's magnanimity the slave has for a while stepped into a new world, a world where people could be happy without always insisting on their rights. It's a much easier place to live, much more pleasant. But it's also quite risky. He may well think: 'If I let this fellow off with the debt, then everyone will take advantage of me.' And let's face it, to cancel a debt completely is not the most natural or normal thing in the world.

The king has opened up a new way of living. The slave, instead of embracing that and acting likewise defends himself against it. He's received mercy but he hasn't allowed it to change him, and the world he chooses to live in is as hard and hopeless as the world he found himself in at the beginning of the parable. In other words, we choose, but whatever choice we make, we take the consequences.

If the parable seems to finish harshly, just look around the world and see what happens when people refuse to forgive and cling to old hurts and grievances. All those who live in a world of revenge assume they have good reason to use violence against others. But the only way to stop it is to do what the king did and cancel the debt, to say enough is enough.

So it's not that God is vindictive, it's that he gives us what we want, he lets us have our choice, but like a good father, he lets us take the consequence of that choice in that hope that it will lead us to repentance. When people refuse to forgive their lives end up like torture. There's an old saying which says holding a grudge, refusing to forgive is like taking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. That's what Jesus describes here.

The parable opens: 'Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times"' (Matthew 18.21–22; cf. Genesis 4.23–24).² If we allow vengeance and lack of forgiveness to gain a foothold it grows, in a few generations from seven to seventy-seven fold, as the story about Lamech in Genesis 4 illustrates. Jesus is telling us that forgiveness and mercy is the precise and only antidote to that.



Mercy and the year of Jubilee



Guy Brandon

Dr Guy Brandon is the research director at the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge.

The old joke goes that a city man got lost on a visit to the countryside. On asking a local for directions, he received the reply: 'If you want to get there, you don't want to start from here!'

Every 25 years the Pope traditionally declares a holy year. This year is an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy: 'be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6.36). This proclamation of a Jubilee is a chance to focus on forgiveness and repentance, and enjoy celebrations, pilgrimages and spiritual growth. Biblically it has great significance. It constituted a reset of the financial system, a chance to wipe the slate clean and promote justice and equality. Although the holy year of mercy does not include a specifically economic element, many will hopefully see this as an opportunity to express mercy in sense inspired by the biblical Jubilee.

The Jubilee Year

The laws governing the Jubilee year are set out in Leviticus 25. Although this is one of the lesser-read chapters of the Old Testament, it plays a key role in articulating the kind of economy and society the Israelites were to have – how they should honour God in their interactions involving money and resources, and every area of life shaped by these.

The distinctive feature of the Jubilee was the return of ancestral land to its original owners every 50th year. Every family was to own an allotment of land, giving them the means to produce their own food and retain their economic independence. This was in stark contrast to the Israelites' experiences in Egypt, where Pharaoh and the priesthood owned

all of the land, and the population remained in a state of perpetual servitude (Genesis 47.20–22). The Israelites themselves suffered even harsher circumstances of forced labour, before God delivered them from Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. Israel was to be distinctively different, not least in the distribution of land.

Naturally, hardships arose in day-to-day life – a poor harvest, loss of livestock or people to work the land through illness and death – necessitating the sale of family property for money to survive. Those families might realistically end up as tenant farmers on land they had previously owned, as had happened in Egypt. This raised a problem: those with the resources to buy land would amass further the means of production, and grow wealthier still, enabling them to buy yet more land from distressed neighbours. Wealth would become concentrated in the hands of a few, possibly leading to circumstances similar to the ones they had fled at the Exodus. If a family was forced to sell land through temporary hardship, that decision could have long-term implications, consigning subsequent generations to lives of dependence.

The Jubilee year was one of several measures by which such inequalities and injustices were curtailed. On a weekly basis, everyone was to rest on the Sabbath, with no exceptions. Not only were people forbidden from working, but they were forbidden from making anyone else work (Deuteronomy 5.12–15). Amongst other things, this prevented the exploitation of labourers who were dependent on their employers for their livelihood –

and it once again stood in contrast to the situation in Egypt, where the Israelites were forced to work day after day without rest (Deuteronomy 5.15). Rest was not just inactivity: it was a form of worship.

This principle was extended, once every seven years, to the sabbatical year. This was a year in which the ground was left fallow, debts were cancelled and those who had entered debt servitude were freed (Leviticus 25.1–7; Deuteronomy 15.1–18).

Finally, the Jubilee Year itself was a 'super-Sabbath', the seventh sabbatical year in the cycle. Thus it constituted both a medium-term (debt relief) and long-term (return of land) reset of the financial system.

What is Mercy?

The word 'mercy' is relatively narrow in meaning and does little to give a sense of the full richness of the biblical background to the term. In English, mercy is generally most closely associated with the idea of forgiveness. This association also occurs in the Bible (e.g. Exodus 34.6–7a). But mercy means far more than forgiveness. The Hebrew term for mercy in the verses above, translated by the Latin *misericors* in the Vulgate, is *hesed*. It is sometimes translated 'loving-kindness' or 'covenant love'. In the Old Testament, *hesed* communicates a sense of faithfulness in one or other form of relationship, including marriage (Genesis 20.13), friendship (1 Samuel 20.15) and diplomacy (2 Samuel 10.2). It is one of the core attributes of God, which humans are required to emulate as creatures made in his image (Micah 6.8). The term *hesed* is often found paired with other characteristics such as justice and compassion.

In fact, *hesed* arguably provides an overarching ethic for the Bible. In Matthew 22.35–40, Jesus teaches that love summarises everything in the Old Testament. However, *ahava*, the Hebrew word for 'love' in the Leviticus and Deuteronomy verses Jesus quotes is, like the English word, vague and open to misinterpretation. In nuancing it, the word *hesed* is a useful term to understand – encompassing many qualities including grace, compassion, faithfulness and love; as well as embodying or bringing about justice, righteousness and holiness.

Pope John Paul II's 1980 encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy)¹ unpacks the themes of divine and human mercy:

Some theologians affirm that mercy is the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God, and the Bible, Tradition and the whole faith life of the People of God provide particular proofs of this ... mercy is an indispensable dimension of love; it is as it were love's second name and, at the same time, the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected.

This understanding of mercy is further informed by a second Hebrew word, *rahamim* – which,

in its very root, denotes the love of a mother (*rehem* = mother's womb). From the deep and original bond, indeed the unity, that links a mother to her child there springs a particular relationship to the child, a particular love. Of this love one can say that it is completely gratuitous, not merited, and that in this aspect it constitutes an interior necessity: an exigency of the heart. It is, as it were, a "feminine" variation of the masculine fidelity to self expressed by *hesed*. Against this psychological background, *rahamim* generates a whole range of feelings, including goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding, that is, readiness to forgive.

Mercy and the Jubilee

It is this understanding of mercy – unconditional, faithful, forgiving, covenant love – that informs the purpose of the Jubilee year.

That the idea of forgiveness is associated with the Jubilee should come as no surprise, since the term 'debt forgiveness', a core concern of the sabbatical year and Jubilee, has become established in our collective consciousness. Debt and sin, and therefore forgiveness, are strongly linked in the Bible; Jesus uses debt as an image for sin, not least in the Lord's Prayer. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant vividly makes the same point (Matthew 18.32–35).

Debt, in itself, is not sinful – though non-payment of a loan is considered both theft and a broken promise, and carries serious consequences in the Old Testament, including loss of collateral and the risk having to enter bonded servitude to pay for the debt. Debt carried obligations to the creditor: a relationship of power, which could all too easily be exploited. 'The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender' (Proverbs 22.7).

The caustic relational impacts of debt and dependency were the reason for the Old Testament's often surprising laws around lending. Debt was only ever supposed to be a temporary state, with loans cancelled in the seventh year. Moreover, as Leviticus 25.37 demands, these loans were to be interest free. The purpose of debt was supposed to be very different than we typically consider it today. Rather than being a convenience, or a way to bring forward future earnings, it was a last-ditch resort, a way of avoiding destitution. The purpose was to help the debtor get back on their feet and reintegrate into society, rather than remaining marginalised, trapped in debt by a cycle of interest payments that ensured they were never able to pay off the original loan. The Jubilee itself was the ultimate cancellation of debt: not just of outstanding financial debt, but a deep-rooted reset of the means of maintaining economic independence.

Thus it should also not be surprising that the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt appears repeatedly in this chapter (Leviticus 25.38, 42, 55). Debt represents a form of slavery, and the Jubilee

NOTES

1. Available online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html

2. Lev 25.35–36, 39–41.

legislation is to prevent the Israelites from being enslaved. Their not-like-Egypt economy was to be structured in such a way that debt was periodically forgiven. It was not merely a just but a merciful system.

The effect of the Jubilee

Mercy – faithfulness, forgiveness, compassion – was the intended result and not just the reason for the Jubilee. Dramatic economic policies have fundamental social impacts; as we have learned, economic policy can never be value-neutral. The nature of our financial system, tax policies, employment law, labour mobility and property market necessarily affect the shape of our family lives, our communities and support networks. The Bible does not treat these as ‘externalities’, as incidental or collateral damage. Rather, it deliberately uses them to facilitate the creation of a certain kind of society.

Mercy is built into this vision. One of the core aims of the Jubilee legislation was to enable families and communities to stay together in times of hardship. Today, we see economic migration on a vast scale. Labour mobility is one of the freedoms guaranteed by EU membership. Migrant labourers account for around 150 million of the world’s 244 million migrants. Although access to work is a positive thing, we have to acknowledge the relational fallout that results from having to emigrate to gain it. Families are split up, parents from children, and older people from those who would, under other circumstances, care for them. Even today, a huge amount of care and support takes place within the extended family. One of the issues the EU will face in the coming years is what happens when the Baby Boom generation retires and requires more care, and the people who might have provided that have moved for work.

For the Israelites, even more than for us, the three-generational family was the core unit of society. It was the primary source of support for the young, the old and the needy within the family, as well as the way that vulnerable people from outside the family found work and were integrated into society. Local communities also held a vital role in welfare provision, criminal and civil justice. Rootedness was critical to building up the stable, long-term relationships that made this possible, and this is what the Jubilee legislation enabled:

If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you ... If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then they and their children are to be released, and they will

go back to their own clans and to the property of their ancestors.²

Thus God’s mercy is reflected in a series of laws that require mercy (forgiveness) and facilitate the expression of compassion and faithfulness within human relationships. Language of redemption runs through Leviticus 25, an inherently merciful provision, whether it relates to houses and other property or to humans redeemed from servitude. The background of slavery in Egypt and the ideal of redemption in the Jubilee laws points forwards to Jesus’ ultimate redemption of humanity on the cross. ‘In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace’ (Ephesians 1.7).

The Extraordinary Jubilee

The biblical Jubilee year has parallels in other ancient near eastern states. When a new king acceded the throne, he would often declare freedom for prisoners and the cancellation of debts for those who had been the victims of extortion by the previous administration’s corrupt officials. The biblical Jubilee institutionalised fairness by making debt cancellation, manumission of slaves and return of land permanent and regular fixtures.

The Pope’s proclamation of an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy hints at something we have forgotten: the need to institutionalise justice and mercy. Of course, you can never legislate for the attitude of the heart, but the law can help signpost the way to attitudes and behaviour that are pleasing to God and beneficial to society as a whole, as well as preventing some of the worst injustices occurring.

In this instance, the Year of Mercy is a particular reminder that *laissez faire* economics makes an idol out of the market. It raises the market to the position of highest good, and it is inevitable that injustices result from this. The biblical Jubilee was a cut-off switch, a reset mechanism that ensured the kinds of injustices we accept as the price of doing business – income inequality, high levels of personal debt, inaccessible house prices, taxpayer-funded bank bailouts – could never happen. It was a vision for a very different economy: one in which money was the means to closer relationships and a stronger, more cohesive society, not the ends in itself. We have replaced solidarity with self-service, community with consumerism, interdependence with independence. These short-term ‘visions’ of how we should live individually and collectively are unsustainable and have long-term implications – the shape of our families and communities, the stability of our economy, the inclusivity of our culture, the compassion we demonstrate to the elderly and the vulnerable and how we pay for and provide for them.

Thus the Extraordinary Jubilee is also a chance for us to reflect individually on our priorities, our values, our lifestyles and our families. To return to the old joke at the beginning: where do we want to go, and what is the first step in getting there?



Mercy and rehabilitation

Inside and outside prison – trigger warning (the place of mercy in the rehabilitation of offenders in the prison system)



Sara Hyde

Sara is the vice-chair of the Fabian Women's Network and a member of the Ministry of Justice public board that appoints Magistrates in Central and South London. She works with young women in custody and in the community.

I cannot remember the first time I consciously experienced mercy. It's a word that was around in my childhood. We said it in church, 'goodness and mercy are going to follow us every day of our lives.' Maybe I experienced leniency rather than punishment for hitting my younger brother, yet for me a full understanding of this word has only developed in adulthood and flourished through prolonged exposure to the criminal justice system and those affected by it. One definition of mercy is that of undeserved clemency: the showing of compassion or benevolence, especially to one under your power. Pope Francis says Jesus is the human face of God's mercy. Being in prisons involves being proximate to people who often recognise their need for mercy more than most. This has been a humbling experience from which I've learned and learned again. We all need mercy, whoever we are. There is immense freedom in acknowledging our need for it and being open to receive it. The way we view crime, punishment and rehabilitation is connected to our view of mercy and our experience of its dynamics in our lives.

It was as a teenager that I started to experience the mercy and lovingkindness of God more profoundly. I was behaving transgressively, recklessly (perhaps just teenagerly?) and this was accompanied by huge feelings of guilt and then an acknowledgment within myself that I needed forgiveness, I needed God's mercy. I was beginning to develop a visceral, lived experience of the dynamics of mercy, despite simultaneously struggling to plumb the depths of Portia's famous speech on the subject in *The Merchant of Venice*

for my GCSE. Then something incredibly serious happened. Our very normal friend – let's call him Gary – had been charged with kidnap and attempted rape. We were utterly shocked. Our friend Gary who had given me lifts at all hours of the day and night, who was gentle and kind, who we spoke to as if he was 'one of the girls' because he was such a good listener and something of a sage to our 17-year-old selves.

In committing this crime, had he simultaneously cut the tie of friendship with us all? So unspeakable was the act and so huge was the feeling of betrayal that accompanied it. We thought we knew Gary. It turns out we didn't. I was 17 and struggling to assimilate seemingly irreconcilable character traits within the frame of one human being.

I knew that I had received mercy from God that had eased my shame. I believed love was a powerful force: I decided these factors required me to continue to be this person's friend. I was also a teenager, navigating life with a tendency to hyper-responsibility and over-identifying with others' difficulties. It was messy. I wrote to Gary. I went to visit him on remand. The experience was a crash course in prisons and how the whole thing worked. I had no idea.

This series of events stitched something into my heart and disrupted some easy labels forever. Gary was an only child. He was also a son and a lover of indie music, as well as a prisoner. I learnt then that humans are so much more complicated than one label naming the worst deed you've ever done.

NOTES

1. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-december-2015
2. David Lammy MP has been asked to investigate evidence of possible racial bias. See www.gov.uk/government/news/review-of-racial-bias-and-bame-representation-in-criminal-justice-system-announced
3. www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Factfile%20Autumn%202015.pdf
4. For more information on restorative justice practices, see www.restorativejustice.org.uk/what-restorative-justice
5. A 2012 National Audit Office briefing stated that there was no correlation between the rate of crime committed and the level of imprisonment www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/NAO_Briefing_Comparing_International_Criminal_Justice.pdf, p. 26.
6. See S Maruna *Making Good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives* (London: American Psychological Association, 2001).

Mercy doesn't do labels. Instead it treats us as individuals and calls out the best in us.

This experience, and a similar one as an adult, changed me. Both crimes had very real victims, they were heard in Crown Courts, guilty verdicts were returned and custodial sentences were rightly imposed. Both men were damaged people and went on to damage other people. But both men were made in the image of God. God teaches me that the cross is enough for every sin and that in his mercy, we are all the same before that cross. It's the great leveller. God sees me the same way as he sees these men but humanly, there needs to be a consequence for actions as serious as these. The unfairness of mercy means this is not straightforward territory.

The dynamics of mercy

The first crucial thing about the dynamics of mercy is *the more you give of it the more you receive or that the more you allow yourself to receive it the more you can give*. A heart that is grateful for abundant mercy finds it hard to deny mercy to others. Learning to receive mercy from God and others can take a lifetime of practice. In the beatitudes Jesus declares, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy' (Mt 5.7). There is a direct correlation between being a receiver and a giver of mercy, they have a cyclical and mutually reinforcing relationship. This is indicated again in Luke 6, 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. 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 measured to you' (vv. 36–38). There is a gauntlet thrown down here to be generous in giving mercy. To engage with the cycle: understanding the mercy we have each received, to let that sink into our bones, so that the natural overflowing of that mercy to those around us can happen.

God's mercy loves me into wholeness. His mercy is radical, life-changing, powerful, core to who Jesus is and the message of the Father. Many of us still have a journey to travel on receiving mercy and letting it penetrate our being and enable a core identity that is beloved child rather than wretched sinner. We know punishment too well, reaching for it first for ourselves and others. The more we experience being loved by a merciful God, the more we want others to experience that same love. The foundational principle for the dynamics of mercy is that God is rich in infinite love. If God treats us like this, then this is the blueprint for how we treat others, whether or not they have committed a criminal offence.

Mercy also operates as the other side of the coin to justice. One reason that we send people to prison is the idea that justice can be served. There is a

demonstrable act that pays for or rebalances the wrong committed. Justice in its purest form makes all things right, equitable, brings things back into balance and this is what mercy does too. Mercy restores and fills in where there is deficit and lack. Both concepts are about wholeness. The entirety of the Bible shows God reaching out to reconcile us to him, to reconcile the world to himself. We live in a time post-Pentecost where we see glimpses of heaven and the Kingdom of God breaking into our earthly experience. This is a taste of what is to come when the whole of creation will be fully reconciled to God. He requires us to love mercy as part of his guide to life as stated in Micah 6, pairing it with the other side of the coin, 'He has shown you, human beings, 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' (v. 8).

We cannot begin to grasp how mercy could play a key role in the rehabilitation of offenders unless we understand the dynamic of mercy in the universe and know that we are all offenders. There is no them and us, because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God or we are all beloved children. We all need rehabilitation and the principles of that journey of healing are the same whoever you are.

A journey of healing

How do we see God treat people involved in crimes in the Bible? Three key biblical figures are involved in murders, but they go on to lead the Jewish people or the early Church and write most of the Bible. Moses brutally beats an Egyptian to death (Ex 2), David organised Uriah's assassination motivated by his adultery (2 Sam 11), Paul, when he was Saul, is introduced to us as supervising and approving the death of Steven (Acts 8.1) and repeatedly makes reference to his persecution of Christians. Mercy is extended again and again. Their crimes do not mean God chooses not to use them. Instead, Moses, David and Paul become famous for things other than killing and God uses them in astonishing ways.

Bringing ideas of justice and mercy to a broken, humanly devised system of justice is difficult. We need a justice system where there is a human act of retribution, like being electronically tagged or sent to prison, but our current prison system is a damaging mess – assaults, self-harm and deaths in custody are at all-time highs.¹ Overcrowding is endemic. Staff are fewer in number, stretched and often inexperienced. The conditions in April 2016's Wormwood Scrubs' inspection were reported as Dickensian. Justice and mercy cannot flourish here. There is little in our criminal justice structures that promotes a bringing back into balance, a moral rightness, justice, let alone interventions that restore, reconcile and repair.

When someone commits a crime it is an act that carries personal responsibility whilst being situated in a particular time in history, in a particular set of social circumstances. Having worked eight years

in and around our justice system, I have heard numerous hideous life-stories – litanies of childhood abuse, neglect, being sold into prostitution as an adolescent, being hospitalised from violence. Most perpetrators of crime are victims long before they are perpetrators. These repeated traumas are often accompanied by resultant mental health problems, self-harm, suicide attempts and/or becoming addicted to drugs to deal with the pain of this existence. The overwhelming majority of people in prison come from less affluent parts of our society, only sexual offences draw from a more even demographic. There is an ethnic disproportionality throughout the system.² Statistics bear out my empirical experiences. Over 70 per cent of prisoners have two or more mental health problems, 24 per cent of people in prison are care leavers, around 50 per cent of women in prison have been in an abusive relationship and officially reported statistics show about a third have suffered childhood sexual abuse, though, anecdotally, I'd put the rate far higher than that.³

State-run institutions are heaving with pain and often mitigate against rehabilitation and restoration. Within all this, how can mercy get a foothold? How can justice reign? Prisons should be places where mercy is practiced and personified, addressing lack. The punishment is deprivation of liberty, not additional hardship once inside. Did you miss out on educational opportunities? Here they are. Did you miss out on healthcare? Here it is. Being able to access high quality restorative justice interventions – where victims can meet their perpetrators – can have a big impact in journeys away from crime, as the human impact is acknowledged, explored and apologised for: both sides extending mercy.⁴ The purpose of prison is to (re)habilitate people, to provide a place where lack can be addressed, to prepare people for life as law abiding citizens, as people with a stake in society, with a reason to follow societal codes. As Christians we are well placed to understand the paradigm. God meets us where we are and meets us with love. This should be the template if we want to see prisons that enable people to live differently, but it is something that seems very far away in many prisons at present.


What is the role of mercy once someone has left prison? Mercy isn't interested in where you've been but where you are going. So many people have told me that the real sentence started the day they left prison – judgement, shame, rejection, distrust from employers, family and friends. Ephesians 2 tells us, 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ' (verses 4–5). Mercy pursues us before we acknowledge we need it and then gives us hope and something to live for. There are a minority of crimes that then carry lifelong restrictions. We need to be wise in the practical implications of some people's post-prison licence

conditions whilst offering friendship and an understanding of what is helpful and safe on the road to recovery.

As part of the Fabian Women's Network I work with people after release from prison. We only work with those who have been on a journey of processing what happened and are able to own their part in it, even if it was in the midst of a barrage of hideous circumstances. Mercy gives us space to take responsibility for our actions without fear of being shamed. Mercy sets us free from the powerless space of victimhood into owning our actions and lives. As an organisation we fight to champion and support people. We are often the first to tell them they can do it or to believe in them as a worthwhile human being. We set the bar high and time and again, with the right support, see people excel. Our reoffending rate is under 5 per cent.

What does mercy for a perpetrator mean for a victim of crime? God is passionate about humans. This means God cares about the victims, witnesses and perpetrators of crime. As a person of peace, a follower of the king of love, of course I want there to be less crime and therefore fewer victims and witnesses living with the aftermath of others' crimes. However, we will not reduce reoffending rates through harsher sentences or more use of prison.⁵ Instead, offenders need to have hope for the future and develop pro-social identities and narratives about their life. These things are profoundly situated in relationship.⁶ The cross means that we don't have to take the harsh sentence or full imprisonment but we can have hope for the future, we can be transformed into something more beautiful each day by being in relationship with the relational trinity and other people who sharpen and humble us on our journey. 'Surely goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life' (Psalm 23.6). Using both these perspectives enables us to imagine a just and merciful system.

To know Jesus is to know mercy. If we can campaign and work to make our prisons places of healing and not criminogenic warehouses of death and despair, we will see the crime rate plummet. If we as Christians and citizens dare to hope in those who are released back into our communities, journeying alongside to enable potential to be realised rather than keeping our distance in case criminality is catching, we will see crime plummet. If we work towards alleviating the drivers of so much crime – inequality, poverty, the care system, broken, scant mental health provision, decent addiction services – we will see crime plummet. God never meets us with wrath, that is our blueprint for interaction with others and to create legislations and systems that usher in shalom and resurrection, not a further descent into hell. The whole system is in need of mercy. God is redeeming *all* of creation. This also includes our institutions and we need to work for the in-breaking of the Kingdom, of mercy, in these systems.



Law, justice and mercy in the justice system



Jeremy Cooke

Sir Jeremy Cooke was a judge at the Queen's Bench in the High Court for 15 years from 2001. He is a former Vice President of Lawyers' Christian Fellowship. He retired in 2016.

The motto of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship (the LCF) comes from Micah 6.8: 'He has showed you, O man, 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.' Here we have the association of justice and mercy (in translation) with walking with God in the same text. But is to act justly the same as to do justice? How does justice fit in with the law which is intended to achieve it? And with loving mercy? And how are they to fit together and correlate to walking humbly with God?

To act justly involves acting rightly, in an equitable, fair and reasonable manner. Justice as an English word connotes an abstract concept of fairness. To do justice is to achieve fairness, usually in a situation in which something unfair or unjust has occurred. The law is that which is intended to achieve justice, whether by regulating human conduct, with a view to avoiding injustice, or by imposing sanctions to remedy injustice which has occurred. Mercy can be defined as the kindly or compassionate forbearance towards an offender and in particular the discretionary power of a judge to pardon someone or mitigate punishment. Walking humbly with God involves keeping in step with and looking to him for approval.

The justice system of any country, insofar as it depends on centralised authority in the shape of a police force, public prosecutors and an appointed judiciary, as opposed to the private instigation of processes of justice by individuals, has little room for mercy in its concern for the achievement of justice.

In the context of criminal law, we use catchwords or phrases like retribution, deterrence, reparation, protection of society, compensation, marking out wrongdoing, paying a debt to society and, more recently, restorative justice, which stresses the remedial nature of sentencing, the putting right of wrongs and reconciliation to restore the situation and to bring closure so far as is possible. All of these feature in the normal human reaction to crime and wrongdoing, quite apart from issues of rehabilitation of the offender. When something is wrong, something must be done to sort it out, to resolve the issues, to ensure justice. But where is mercy in that?

In the English criminal courts, the only time that the word mercy is likely to be heard is in the context of sentencing, where the Judge may say that, because of some mitigating feature, he or she will not, as an act of mercy, administer the condign punishment that the offending and offender otherwise, in justice, or in his view of the law, deserve. Justice is seen as requiring a particular sanction but the exercise of mercy leads to something less severe as a matter of compassionate forbearance.

In the English civil context, mercy is a term which is unlikely to be heard at all. The pursuit by an individual or corporate body for a remedy in respect of wrong done, usually focusses on the actionable fault of the other party and the need for payment to compensate for what has happened. This seeks, so far as is possible and practicable, to put parties back in the position they were before the wrongdoing.

In both cases the focus is on justice according to the law – to balance the scales – to bring about some equivalence in putting right what has gone wrong so far as is possible to do so.

Mercy is not a word which features in the Sentencing Guidelines laid down for judges of crime in England. Section 142 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 sets out the aims of sentencing as being the punishment of offenders, the reduction of crime (including its reduction by deterrence), the reform and rehabilitation of the offender, the protection of the public and the making of reparation by offenders to persons affected by their offences. Yet the Guidelines also require consideration of a reduction in the sentence to be imposed by reason of a plea of guilt and by reason of remorse. The effect of this is that the sentence, which would otherwise be seen as deserved is reduced, can be seen either as an act of mercy compared with the retribution deserved or as a lesser punishment because the remorseful and/or confessing offender is seen as deserving of a lesser sanction and the gravity of the offending is thus reduced.

The view of the average Judge, I suspect, is that it is not his or her job to be merciful but to do what justice requires under the law and he or she is likely to see the reduction of sentence, for pleas of guilt and remorse, as reflecting the lesser criminality or guilt of the individual offender. It is the function of the Judge to pass sentence in accordance with the gravity of the crime and the consequences of it and not to offer mercy on behalf of victims or their families who are often vindictively seeking the maximum sentence available for the wrongs which have been perpetrated on them or their relatives. Thus whilst judges may speak of mercy when sentencing, it is doubtful whether they see it as, or if it is, any part of their task to do anything other than mete out a sanction that is seen as merited by the criminal conduct, in all the circumstances as seen as the time of sentencing. Justice requires the balancing of the scales in the sense of taking the interests of the victims and that of society as a whole into account. The Guidelines aim to ensure a degree of uniformity in sentencing, in order to eliminate any element of postcode lottery.

Moreover, the Judge is not the victim who has suffered at the hands of the perpetrator and it is not within his or her competence, nor part of his or her function to offer forgiveness for the wrong done nor to exercise mercy, save in the limited manner referred to in the context of sentence. Although most crimes are committed against individuals, the reason that they are seen as crimes and not merely as civil wrongdoing, remediable at the private suit of the individual, is that the actions are seen as so serious that the interests of the state are involved. The wrongdoing is perceived as affecting society at large in such a detrimental way that the state must take action to preserve its integrity and stability.

It is clear that the five different elements that the Criminal Justice Act refers to as the aims of sentencing create a tension in sentencing. How can they all be properly reflected in the imposition of a sentence on an individual? In practice it is almost inevitable that one or more elements will predominate in passing sentence, whilst others play a lesser role or are not taken into account at all, depending on the track record of the offender, the seriousness of the crime, the likelihood, in the judge's eyes in the light of any pre-sentence report, of any reform or rehabilitation and other factors relating to the frequency and mischief caused by offending of the kind in question in the relevant location. Thus, reform and rehabilitation are likely to play a much greater role in sentencing a first-time young offender than when sentencing a professional burglar with a lifetime of convictions for burglary behind him.

The full expression of mercy is not open to the judiciary of England, under the constitutional arrangements in place. There is a separation and balance of powers between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. To pardon is the Royal prerogative, exercised in practice now by the Home Secretary. It is perhaps incapable of challenge, but, regardless of that, it is significant that the function of justice is institutionally separate from the function of pardon, which can be exercised before, during or after the imposition of a sanction. The granting of a pardon is now in practice very rare and the full weight of the law is brought to bear with the wheels of justice sometimes grinding exceedingly small.

So how should all this work in the context of the biblical framework through which a Christian views law, justice and the system of law and justice? As the LCF perceives, it is to the old covenant to which the Christian must look for guidance, because Jesus had little to say about the institutions of government and their operation as such, save to point out that both Caesar and Pilate (executive and judiciary combined) were in place under the sovereign rule of YHWH (power given you from above) and to endorse the Old Testament as the Scripture which cannot be broken.

As to law, we find that Israel was intended as a light for the nations and that God gave them a model law to show his concern for justice and the rule of his law.¹ He ordained a legal system with judges in the Old Testament for the benefit of society.² It was clear that not only judges but kings and other authorities should themselves be under the rule of law and subject to his judgement.³ He provided for some separation of powers too. This is what God envisaged as right for fallen human society, Jew and Gentile alike, society regulated by law with a system of justice to put wrongs right, until he finally and comprehensively deals with the problem of evil.

NOTES

1. See Deut 4.5–8.

2. Ex 18; Deut 1.15–18; 16.18–20; 17.9–12; 2 Chr 19.

3. See Deut 17.14–20.

4. See CJH Wright *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2009).

As to justice, we find that the biblical view of justice is not that which comes to the mind of most ordinary people when the word is mentioned. Justice is not simply punishment for crime. Justice is an active word in the Hebrew Bible. It is closely linked to righteousness and they appear frequently together in the Old Testament as a hendiadys, where the combination of the words has a composite meaning beyond that of the individual words, for example: 'The Lord loves righteousness and justice' (Psalm 33.5); 'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne' (Psalm 97.2).

Righteousness (*sedeq*) means getting things absolutely straight or right-fixed and exactly as it should be. A norm by which other things are measured, but in terms of relationship – responding rightly in relationship to YHWH and to others. It is not simply an abstract concept and is used in an active sense. So also justice (*mishpat*) is an active word which means putting things right – to fix a situation that has gone wrong, whether by dealing with wrongdoers, or vindicating and delivering those who have been wronged. It can be in a court of law or outside it, even in battle (hence the book of Judges). The word can mean the process of litigation, or the judgement at the end of it. It can mean a legal ordinance or precedent in case law. It can mean the rightful case brought by someone who has been wronged. In essence, however, *mishpat* is what needs to be done to restore *sedeq*.⁴

But mercy is not left out of the equation because law, righteousness and justice are all, in biblical thinking, rooted in the character of the Lord and mercy is also part of that character. So it is that the word for righteousness comes in New Testament times to mean almsgiving, the showing of benevolence to the needy as a matter of obligation on the part of the giver, but not a matter of right for the recipient. In Isaiah 30.18 justice is paired not with righteousness but with his grace and compassion, which is at odds with a view that justice consists of punishment and condemnation: 'The LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For [i.e. because] the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all those who wait for him.' The verse states that it is because of his justice, that he longs to be gracious and compassionate. His grace stems from his desire to put things right for us. And that is what any system of justice should aim at. But just as justice was part of the character of the Lord, so too was mercy and the two are held together in him and demonstrated in the system of law and justice that he gave his people as a model from which other nations should learn.

His grace and mercy were evident in his calling of his people and the exhibition of his faithful covenant love to them (*hesed*). Notwithstanding their failure to observe righteousness, he longed to be gracious and to demonstrate his justice, by putting things right through his mercy and covenant love. Only he could do that for individuals and humanity which was incapable of putting things right for

themselves. The Law could not do it, as Paul makes plain in Romans. Righteousness is unattainable by all humanity but in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed: 'now a righteousness from God apart from the law has been made known to which the Law and the Prophets testify (Romans 3.21). The cross of Christ is God's ordained way of justice – of putting things right: 'God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus' (Romans 3.25–26). God's justice is seen in the cross in the substitutionary atonement of the Son which puts things right between us and him. Ultimately, moreover, as Jesus put it in his story about the unjust judge who was prevailed on to do justice for a cheated widow: 'And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? ... I tell you, he will see that they get justice' (Luke 18.7–8). If an unjust judge can be pestered into doing justice, the one thing of which you can be sure of is that God will ultimately do justice and, unlike human judges and juries, will get it right. He has and will put right what we cannot.

Most translations of Micah 6.8 do not properly capture the Hebrew words used, where to act justly is *mishpat*, with the meaning previously identified of doing justice, where to love mercy is *hesed* – to show steadfast, faithful covenant love alongside the need to walk humbly with our God. In the context of the Lord's complaint against Israel/Judah in Micah 6, the words probably do not have the sense often given to them in common current thinking of social justice as such, nor even in the sense of justice at law, as an English lawyer might see it, but they reflect the character of the Lord who demands a response from us in the light of our own failures. The response to his offer of mercy, is seen to be the putting right of wrongs in repentance, the keeping of his covenant with its law and demand for righteousness and the humble walking with him, relying on his Spirit's power to keep us in his ways, in step with him.

Within that, the lawyer and the judge are his agents to effect righteousness and justice and to be salt and light in the world, showing his character as children with the family likeness. Our systems are fallible and cannot measure up to the justice of the Lord who, as Judge of all the earth, will do right for all ultimately, but it would be good if our systems were more closely modelled on the paradigm which the Old Testament people of God saw as the greatest gift that he had graciously imparted to them and if our lives better demonstrated his ways and commended them to others – regulation of our society by reference to God's *sedeq* and his *mishpat* in the putting right of what has gone wrong.



'Let anyone of you who is without sin ...'



Marijke Hoek

Dr Marijke Hoek part of the adjunct faculty at Regents Theological College, where she teaches in modules on biblical justice for the poor at undergraduate and masters level. She is also co-editor of *Micah's Challenge* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2008) and *Carnival Kingdom* (Gloucester: Wide Margin, 2013).

Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery is a small, near monochrome painting, reproduced above, by the Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This Renaissance painter known for a peasant's eye view of the 16th century delicately crafted this drama from the Gospel of John in shades of grey on a small panel, which is signed and dated 1565.

It shows a solitary female standing at the centre of the composition, surrounded by her accusers and potential assassins. Beside her, Jesus is kneeling down. Slightly raised are the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who've brought in the woman and have just challenged him. 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' (John 8.4–5). Stooping lowly, Jesus begins to formulate his answer in the dust – in close proximity to the stones that could become the tools of her execution. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8.7). It's a merciful response drafted in a hostile, legalistic climate.

There is nothing formulaic about Jesus' response. John's Gospel does not appeal to the Law as prescriptive of moral conduct. Rather, John presents Jesus as the one who has come from God to bring life. He is the lamb of God taking away the sin of the world (1.29; 5.39, 46ff.). Sin is a reality in the community John addresses. Our lives are indeed lived out in shades of grey. In fact, those who claim to be without sin are lying. Yet, once sin

is brought into the light and confessed, forgiveness and cleansing follow (1 John 1.8–10).

We know from John's account that the stage will gradually empty until we are left with Christ and the woman. The conversation will get a private, restorative character. He will not condemn her either but simply declare, 'Go now and leave your life of sin' (John 8.11). His gracious answer contains both a clear rejection of sin and a mandate to live righteously. God's mercy is extended to her.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees who had enquired after Jesus' verdict had done so to set a trap in order to have a basis to accuse him (John 8.5-6). The wisdom in his response both circumvents this ploy and bears witness to the weighty matter of mercy. In fact, in several recorded disputes with the Pharisees Jesus cites Hosea 6.6: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice' (Matthew 9.13, 12.7).

We know from Luke's portrayal of the pharisee that there was no awareness of the need for mercy, as depicted in the prayer: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers' (Luke 18.11). Such self-righteousness contrasts sharply with the man humbly calling on God for mercy. Only one went home justified (Luke 18.9–14).

John's Gospel tells a story about Jesus' life and ministry in explicitly didactic passages and in narratives. Interwoven in the stories are matters pertaining to discipleship. Mercy is a critical character quality that he instills in teaching the disciples. Here in John's narrative of the adulterous

NOTES

1. B Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (Scribe: London, 2015).

2. JD Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2010).

3. Available online at www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame?language=en

4. D Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 52.

5. See *Micah's Challenge: The Church's Responsibility to the Global Poor* (eds. J Thacker & M Hoek; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2008).

woman, Jesus demonstrates what is good. As the prophet Micah asserted, 'He has shown you, O mortal, 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' (6.8).

The mercy – *hesed* – we are to love, alongside justice and humility, is also translated in our English texts as 'faithfulness' or 'loving kindness'. The word occurs nearly 250 times in the Scriptures, mostly depicting a quality of God and his dealings with people. Yet a quarter of its occurrences refer to the merciful qualities there are, or ought to be, between people. So the 'mercy' that we are to love is in fact God's loving kindness to us that has given us the base and pattern for our kindness to others. When his disciples are sent into the world, their lives are patterned after his: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (John 20.21).

In order to extend mercy, we have to be proximate to the broken. It requires us to draw a line in the sand, stand up for the accused and be a witness to mercy. Recounting 30 years of legal experience defending the most marginalised, the Christian lawyer Bryan Stevenson compels us to be merciful to the accused and monitor our posture:

Today, our self-righteousness, our fear, and our anger have caused even the Christians to hurl stones at the people who fall down, even when we know we should forgive or show compassion ... we can't simply watch that happen ... we have to be stonecatchers.

In his book *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Stevenson calls for a merciful justice that is redemptive.¹ As a young US lawyer troubled and concerned about the deep fractures and flaws caused by injustice, racial prejudice and inequality, he was compelled by an urgent sense of vocation to help the accused, particularly those who have no means to pay for an advocate to shield them from injustice. His commitment to people who are (wrongly) sentenced in a criminal justice system that still supports capital punishment vividly shows that such advocacy – 'stone catching' if you like – literally is a matter of life and death. While the legal complexity requires tenacious commitment, what emerges powerfully is his work ethic that is shaped by a merciful, respectful and pastoral approach towards each client. His compassionate and restorative advocacy changes the lives of his clients as well as the character of the procedures, thus reorienting individuals and marginalised communities towards hope. Moreover, Stevenson has persuasively argued in the Supreme Court the case for systemic change, thus effecting amendments in legislation and shaping the quality of justice in the nation. As Abraham Lincoln asserted in his era, 'I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.'

The call to love mercy, act justly and walk humbly with our God shapes our relations with individuals and communities and implies the challenge to

think through a constructive subversion of the frameworks of social life. In his book *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter's theological reflection centres on the Christian vocation to live faithfully in seeking the wellbeing – *shalom* – of the community.² For Christian believers, the call to faithfulness is a call to live in fellowship

to extend mercy, we have to be proximate to the broken, draw a line in the sand, stand up for the accused and be a witness to mercy

and integrity with the person and witness of Jesus Christ. There is a timeless character to this call that evokes qualities of life and spirit that are recognisable throughout history and across cultural boundaries. Such faithfulness, Hunter argues,

needs to be worked out in the multifaceted realities of actual situations, in the context of complex, social, political, economic, and cultural forces that prevail at a particular time and place ... To face up to the challenge of integrity and faithfulness in our generation, then, requires that Christians understand the unique and evolving character of our times.

In every sphere of our society (media, enterprise, education, judiciary, etc.) we are meant to challenge structures or dynamics that dishonour God and dehumanise people, and offer a constructive alternative that extends into the institutions of which we are part.

In a recent TED talk, 'The Price of Shame', Monica Lewinsky reflected on the 'virtual stone throwers'.³ The woman at the centre stage following the exposing of her affair with President Clinton and the focus of a federal investigation into her private life received no mercy in the endless cycle of media, political and personal harassment. At the time, her parents feared that she would be humiliated to death – literally. In this era of cyber-bullying, young people have indeed ended their lives, as they could no longer envisage bearing up in such a culture of humiliation. There is nothing virtual about such mobs, their stones or the tragic deaths. Jesus would not have condemned her but rather engaged her in a conversation with a restorative character. In the contemporary renaissance of public shaming, we ought to be mindful of our merciful witness – in public and private contexts. As she advocates for a safer and more compassionate social media, CNN rightly commented; 'We could all learn a few things from Monica Lewinsky, particularly about ourselves.'

'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' The inward gaze Jesus

evokes teaches us indeed a few things about ourselves. Such honing of the lens is found in another occasion in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus teaches on 'mercy' in response to Peter's question, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' (Matthew 18.21) While Peter may have hoped to extract the redeeming formula, Jesus opts to tell a parable about debts instead. In fact, 19 of Jesus' 30 parables concern an economic or social context. In an era in which the yoke of unpayable debts would have weighed heavily and could even cause

daily expressions of mercy express the nature of God's Kingdom

a person to become a debt slave, his teaching on mercy is critical. He voices a harsh critique of the merciless:

Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "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?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

(Matthew 18.32–35).

Proximity to brokenness will move us to uncomfortable places and sharpen and direct our lens. 'We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.'⁴ The fact that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this from his prison cell speaks volumes, as his audacity to draw a line in the toxic German soil and act up for the vulnerable would come at a colossal price. Blessed are the merciful (Matthew 5.7). In *Micah's Challenge* Tim Chester writes:

The beatitudes of Matthew 5 are not statements of piety or advice for happy living. They are declarations of liberation. The Christian community is to be God's light in the world, demonstrating that it is good to live under God's rule. The liberated community is to be a liberating community – a community of the broken for the broken.⁵

In Paul's epistle to the church in Ephesus we read:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ and raised us up together ... that in

the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

(Ephesians 2.4–10, KJV).

To 'walk' is a metaphor of daily conduct. We are to monitor how we walk, walking in a manner worthy of our calling, not as the Gentiles, but humbly walking in the light and in sacrificial love (4.1–2, 17; 5.1–2, 8). In such daily faithfulness, we can count on powerful help. John's Gospel contains distinctive teaching on the Paraclete who will be with us and help us:

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.

(John 15.26)

John's portrayal of the world characterised by binary polarities (light and darkness; good and evil; truth and lies; life and death) sketches the contours of this Spirit-led *Existenzwandel* in a fractured world where people suffer hostile life-relations and accusatory rhetoric. The Spirit will help us testify about him before the world. The Paraclete will give power and steadfastness to bear witness to God's merciful truth (John 16.7–15).

Whether our daily walk and the good works that he has prepared for us lie in pastorate, law, enterprise, IT, education or elsewhere, mercy is meant to shape all our vocations. Daily expressions of mercy express the nature of his Kingdom. Mercy restores a broken person to a meaningful life in community. Mercy can define the character of our justice. Mercy needs to be the hallmark of our virtual and our actual presence. Whatever sphere we operate in, we need a spirited wisdom that is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, impartial, sincere and full of mercy (James 3.17). Living faithfully, Christ's reign invades the world, not hindered by our own 'shady lives' but rather displayed in it.



Showing mercy: Lessons from *The Merchant of Venice*



Linzy Brady

Dr Linzy Brady is an Honorary Research Associate in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney. Her latest publications include editions of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and *Richard III* (co-edited with David James and Jane Coles) for the Cambridge School Shakespeare Series.

The Merchant of Venice has often been described as a play about anti-semitism rather than an anti-Semitic play. Shakespeare's play problematises anti-semitism by presenting Shylock as a well-rounded, three-dimensional, and at times sympathetic, character who is both victim and aggressor in Christian Venice. The humanisation of a Jewish outsider and the presentation of Shylock's vices, virtues and personal experience of racism and abuse is a challenging exploration of anti-semitism. *The Merchant of Venice* is also a play about mercy – Portia's speech about mercy features near the top in any list of memorable Shakespearean quotations – and it evokes and problematises the Christian concept of mercy. Although it is not hard to see how the theme of mercy runs through Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, I would like to suggest that it is more present in language and rhetoric than in practice. The appropriation of mercy and justice by the Venetian Christians ultimately questions the kind of mercy shown to Shylock at the end of the play.

Shakespeare's Shylock is one of many stage-Jews represented in the public playhouses in early modern England. The history of the stage-Jew reaches back a couple of hundred years before Shakespeare's play to the origins of English drama when the Mystery Cycles in cities such as York, Coventry and Chester staged the story of the Bible from creation to last judgement. The representation of Jewish people were those of the betrayers of Christ: Judas, with his deceptive 'Judas-kiss', red hair and beard, and hooked nose, was the origin of the dramatic tradition representing the

deceptive and murderous stage Jew. Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* reflects this tradition and his Barabbas is the 'villainous Jew' that was popular on stage and in print. The play reflected broader stereotypes of Jewish people as Christ-killers and murderers of Christians, stereotypes which were luridly detailed in pamphlets and ballads such as *A New Song: Shewing the Crueltie of Gernutus a Jew*. It was thought Jews had not only the blood of Christ on their hands but also the blood of Christians, especially children, whom they killed in religious rituals.¹

Jewish people were vilified and portrayed as devious, cruel and avaricious in popular culture. Such stereotypes could flourish without restraint among uneducated people in a world where there were few Jewish people to challenge any representation of them as unnatural and demonic. A few musicians in the court of Henry VIII were known to have been of Jewish descent, having fled from the persecution of the Spanish Inquisition, and one prominent Jewish convert was physician-in-chief to Elizabeth I. In 1594, Roderigo Lopez made enemies among some of the queen's powerful courtiers and was accused of plotting to poison the queen. His arrest and trial was a well-publicised and highly emotive affair, but alongside the scurrilous pamphlets and ballads there emerged a picture of a man unfairly treated and fighting against people and prejudices much more powerful than he was. After being held for 38 days without a hearing, Lopez was given a trial, found guilty and sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered. He was executed on 7 June 1594.

It is unlikely that Shakespeare was unaware of Lopez's execution. He wrote *The Merchant of Venice* within a few years of Lopez's trial and execution and Shylock is a much more complex and challenging character than any Jew ever portrayed on the English stage in his time. Shakespeare's Shylock is neither the stage-Jew nor the villainous Jew, although in early descriptions of the play he has elements of both. Thomas Jordan, who had been an actor in the King's Men before the closure of the theatres, later wrote a ballad recalling the appearance of Shylock:

His beard was red; his face was made
Not much unlike a witches.
His habit was a Jewish gown,
That would defend all weather;
His chin turned up, his nose hung down,
And both ends met together.²

The first quarto of *The Merchant of Venice*, published in 1600 claimed that the play had been 'divers times acted by the Lord Chamberlain his servants' and provided a summary which emphasised Shylock's cruelty:

The most excellent historie of the merchant of Venice. With the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Jewe towards the sayd merchant, in cutting a just pound of his flesh: and the obtayning of Portia by the choyse of three chests.³

It is clear Shylock is presented as a strange mixture of both the stereotypical Jew and the stage-Jew. Yet his character also develops beyond this stereotype: he is also an innocent man who is unfairly pushed to his extreme limits and crushed after being driven to revenge. His famous appeal to a common humanity marks him as both victim and aggressor:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?⁴

At the beginning of the play, Shylock is presented with many attributes of an innocent victim. He is abused by Antonio and other characters spit on him and treat him like a dog: Gratiano in particular curses him vehemently and describes his desires as 'wolvish, bloody, starved and ravenous' (4.1). By the end of the play, Shylock is clearly aligned with the Torah and his behaviour and his moral code derives from Jewish Law. He vows to outdo the Christians in their example of revenge, he refuses to contemplate mercy, and he insists on the idea of justice commonly linked to the Jewish Scriptures: 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. He says 'I crave the law/The penalty and forfeit of my bond' (4.1) and he does not trust Christian mercy:

If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge!⁵

The change he undergoes throughout the play from victim to aggressor is one which undercuts the sympathy evoked earlier because Shakespeare's imagery and rhetoric works powerfully against him. As Shylock becomes increasingly belligerent, Antonio, his debtor, becomes increasingly more like an innocent victim, even a *Christ-like* victim. Furthermore, Portia's clear appropriation of New Testament ideals of mercy and justice add to the weight of judgement against Shylock both in the Venetian court and in the audience.

Portia is a witty and intelligent woman who, in disguise as Balthazar, is a 'wise young judge' who gives an eloquent defence of Antonio and a stern cross-examination of Shylock in the Venetian court. She uses the law to curb Shylock's stubborn demand for the bond Antonio has forfeited. The bond was a pound of flesh: Antonio's loss of fortune meant he was forced to provide this very pound of flesh and Shylock's demand was that it was to be cut off from the part of his body closest to his heart. When Portia says she cannot alter the decree which has been established, because it will set a dangerous precedent, Shylock applauds her wisdom:

A Daniel come to judgement, yea, a Daniel!—
O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!⁶

However, when all is set for this macabre act of justice and Antonio's chest is bared for Shylock's knife, Portia suddenly says to him:

Tarry a little. There is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.⁷

She points out that the bond allows him one pound of flesh but no drops of blood. Her final judgement is that if Shylock spills one drop of his blood all his lands and goods are to be confiscated by the state of Venice. Gratiano repeatedly mocks Shylock by calling Portia, 'An upright judge, a learned judge' and even a 'second Daniel!'

Just as Shylock is clearly identified with the Old Testament, so the Venetians are associated with the New Testament. The Beatitudes, in Matthew 5, include a description of mercy ('Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy') that echoes the Lord's Prayer ('For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you') and is itself reflected in Portia's famous speech:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,

NOTES

1. See J Shapiro's online article 'How were the Jews regarded in 16th-century England?' www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/how-were-the-jews-regarded-in-16th-century-england

2. E Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), p. 23.

3. T Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 61.

4. Act 3, Scene 1.

5. Act 3, Scene 1.

6. Act 4, Scene 1.

7. Act 4, Scene 1.

8. Act 4, Scene 1.

9. When Portia describes mercy with reference to the light of a candle, 'How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world' (5.1), she echoes Philippians 2.15 in the Geneva Bible, which reads 'That ye may be blameless, and pure, and the sons of God without rebuke in the midst of a naughty and crooked nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world'. See also N Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999).

10. Act 4, Scene 1.

11. J Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 228.

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.⁸

Portia's speech is underpinned by biblical themes and imagery: the concept of mercy which 'blesseth him that gives and him that takes' is taken from Christ's teachings and example and the imagery of 'gentle rain from heaven' is taken from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 32.2 (NKJV) we find similar imagery:

Let my teaching drop as the rain,
My speech distill as the dew,
As raindrops on the tender herb,
And as showers on the grass.

In Ecclesiasticus, a book included in earliest versions of accepted Scripture and also in the Geneva Bible (1583), we find a closer fit for Portia's speech: 'O how faire a thyng is mercy in the tyme of anguish and trouble: it is like a cloud of rayne that commeth in the tyme of drought' (35.19). This is one of the many examples that show Shakespeare not only alluding to biblical characters, imagery and themes, but also directly quoting from specific verses.⁹

The two words most often associated with Jesus, 'blessed' and 'mercy', are also most often associated with Portia in this speech. She appropriates the rhetoric of a merciful and just judge even as Antonio appropriates the imagery of a Christ-like victim ready to suffer on behalf of his friend, Bassanio, and he suffers with a Christian-like patience:

I do oppose
My patience to his fury, and am arm'd
To suffer, with a quietness of spirit,
The very tyranny and rage of his.¹⁰

Christ's teachings, as well as his example, are also appropriated and the Parable of the Unjust Servant in Matthew 18 is not far from surface of *The Merchant of Venice*. As in this parable, the central concern is with mercy and with what happens when people receive mercy without extending it to others. When the Duke asks, 'How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?' (4.1), he is also echoing the New Testament's description in the epistle written by James: 'For he shall have judgement without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgement' (2.13 KJV).

As the court case progresses it becomes increasingly evident that the Venetians believe Shylock has forgone his opportunity to give and receive mercy and therefore that he deserves harsh judgement, death and the confiscation of all his goods. This judgement is modified in a display of mercy by Antonio and his sentence is changed to conversion to Christianity and the forfeit of half

his goods. This judgement is a crushing sentence and Shylock's loss of religion, goods and, earlier, his daughter ('O my ducats! O my daughter!'), is only compounded by the fact that it is meted out as 'mercy' by the self-righteous Antonio.

The Parable of the Unjust Servant is used to beat Shylock over the head, proving to him how he had failed and therefore deserved the consequences. A better use of the parable would have been to use it as a mirror to reflect upon their own faults as servants equally unworthy of receiving mercy and to guide their conduct towards other unworthy servants. One of the main points about the parable is that God is the ultimate judge, not the other servants. In appropriating the right to judge in matters of salvation, life and death, the Venetian Christians are overstepping the boundaries laid out in the very verses they use to condemn Shylock. Their mercy is flawed and when clothed with self-righteousness and religious rhetoric, also dangerous.

Shakespeare refuses to allow his audiences to respond to what is happening on the stage before them with simple notions of justice versus mercy or victim versus aggressor. As Shapiro puts it:

much of the play's vitality can be attributed to the ways in which it scrapes against a bedrock of beliefs about the racial, national, sexual, and religious difference of others. I can think of no other literary work that does so as unrelentingly and as honestly.¹¹

The picture Shakespeare paints is far more complex in terms of the depth of character, the complexity of the problem and the intricate layer of linguistic details which problematise not only responses to the play and its characters but also concepts of justice and mercy. The ending of *The Merchant of Venice* can often leave an audience unsettled, uneasy and very uncomfortable as it plummets the depths of human hopelessness and despair. It should remind a Christian that mercy is best defined and administered by God whose justice cannot be divorced from divine grace in the way human judgements often are. A helpful saying might help clarify some of the tension that lingers over the kind of mercy and justice shown to Shylock at the end of the play:

Justice is getting what you deserve,
mercy is not getting what you deserve,
grace is getting what you don't deserve.

The justice that was so self-righteously tempered with 'mercy' and administered by the Venetian court in Shakespeare's play is a very different thing to the divine justice which is tempered with mercy and grace as described in the Bible. The first is what was offered to Shylock by people who had wrested the imagery and rhetoric of the Bible to their own advantage. The second is what Christians should strive to experience and give in our suffering and broken world today.

News from Bible Society

Transmission is provided free by Bible Society as part of our mission to equip the church to live out the Bible's message. We also work creatively and with passion to show that the Bible resonates with issues today – and to make Scriptures available where there are none.

Paul Woolley
Interim Chief Executive



'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.'

(Lamentations 3.22–23, NRSV)

I hope that you have enjoyed this edition of *Transmission* with its focus on mercy.

In view of everything that is happening in the world right now, it is difficult to think of a more appropriate subject to consider. In the last couple of months alone, terrorist attacks have dominated the news media. In June, a 29-year-old security guard killed 49 people and wounded 53 others inside Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando. On the evening of 14 July, 85 people were killed and 302 injured when a 19-ton cargo truck was deliberately driven into crowds celebrating Bastille Day in Nice. In July, Germany was hit by a shooting spree, an axe attack, a suicide bombing and a machete assault that left 13 dead. According to a report I read only yesterday, Isis is planning simultaneous attacks in the UK, France and Germany.

Of course, although it is the attacks in Europe and America that dominate our media, the reality is that the rest of the world, especially the Middle East and Africa, faces a daily onslaught of terrorist activity and unimaginable suffering. Search 'List of terrorist incidents, 2016' on Wikipedia, and you will quickly see what I mean. Incidents are recorded almost every day. Scrolling through my Twitter feed last night, I clicked on a Tweet by a journalist from *The Washington Post* with CCTV footage showing the moment Aleppo's M10 hospital came under attack earlier that morning. In all of this, we exclaim along with Kurtz in Conrad's book, *The Heart of Darkness*, 'The horror! The horror!'

What on earth are we to do in the face of such evil? In recent times, I have

caught myself repeating the words of Lamentations 3.22–23 and voicing the simple prayer 'Lord, have mercy on us.' I do not know how else to respond. The only certainty that we have is that God's love is steadfast and his mercy is unending. And the only option open to us, in the words of the prophet Micah (6.8), is to 'act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'

At Bible Society, we are working hard to bring the Bible to life in some of the world's most challenging places, including fragile states in Africa and the Middle East. Please join me in praying for our colleagues leading our work here, especially Edward, in South Sudan, and George, in Syria. Our experience in the world's toughest places, as around the world, is that when people engage with the Bible, the story of the loving purposes of God, the lives of individuals and communities can change, for good. The Bible really is good news for the world.

This was a theme picked up by the General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK at the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast in June. In the event, organised by Bible Society, His Grace Bishop Angaelos spoke about the alienation of Middle East Christians, following decades of the marginalisation of and systematic targeting of Christian faith communities.

In an altogether different setting, Bible Society volunteers, supporters, staff and trustees joined 10,000 people on 12 June on The Mall for a party to celebrate the Queen's 90th birthday. Despite it raining – very heavily – on her parade, there was a great atmosphere and our patron paid tribute to the generosity of spirit shown by people like you who support the hundreds of charities and voluntary organisations represented.

Appropriately, 'mercy' is just one of the themes contained in *The Servant Queen and the King she serves*, the book that

Bible Society has co-published with HOPE and LICC, to draw attention to the role of the Queen's Christian faith in her life and work. Over a million copies of the book have now been published. It will make a great Christmas present or stocking filler. So, if you would like to order copies, please go to cpo.org.uk/thequeen.

This will be my last editorial as Interim Chief Executive. Our new Chief Executive, Paul Williams, will be joining us in the Autumn and will be writing this piece in future editions of *Transmission*. Do please pray for Paul as he prepares to take up his role.

Thank you, as always, for your partnership in our global Bible mission.

Paul Woolley

Paul Woolley is Interim Chief Executive at Bible Society

If you would like to email him, you can contact him at paul.woolley@biblesociety.org.uk

Or, follow him on Twitter @paultwoolley

Across the world, millions of people are not engaging with the Bible. This is often because the Scriptures aren't available or accessible, or because their significance and value haven't yet been recognised. Working in over 200 countries, Bible Society is a charity and on a global mission to offer the Bible to every man, woman and child. This is because we believe that when people engage with the Bible, lives can be changed, for good.

The Bible in Transmission is published by Bible Society, Stonehill Green, Westlea, Swindon SN5 7DG
T: 01793 418100 F: 01793 418118 biblesociety.org.uk Registered charity 232759 Incorporated by Royal Charter

Chair of the Board of Trustees James Featherby Interim Chief Executive Paul Woolley
Editorial Team Matthew van Duyvenbode, Paula Gooder, Steve Holmes, Chine McDonald, Nick Spencer
Editor Tony Graham

ISBN 978-0-564-09176-8 ©Bible Society 2016

