

## *Second Sunday of Easter, Year B*

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*These Teaching Tips offer brief pointers for avoiding anti-Jewish bias and for highlighting positive observations about Judaism which might otherwise go unnoticed in Catholic preaching and teaching. The readings follow the lectionary for Mass used in the Roman Catholic rite, in Australia.*

### **Second Sunday of Easter Sunday. Divine Mercy Sunday. \***

In the Catholic world, during the Jubilee 2000, Pope John Paul II proclaimed that henceforth the Second Sunday of Easter would be celebrated as “Divine Mercy Sunday”, a feast also observed in some places by other Christians. Mindful of this, the following reflections consider the Hebraic depths of “Mercy”.

Let’s begin with a beautiful Hebrew word: *Rahamim*, meaning “compassions”, “tender mercies”. Its root is *reham*, which means ‘womb’. Thus, God is *raham*, compassionate, merciful. Divine love is ‘womb-like’, with the intensity of a mother’s love for her child. This image is a powerful starting point for thinking about mercy in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Mercy can be described as the divine response to the cry of distress. Scripture abounds with the cries of people in distress: those in grave danger, perhaps afflicted by physical or mental illness, trapped in poverty, grieving the loss of loved ones, abandoned, far from home, fearful, perhaps sinful, wounded, lost, uncertain of the future. The Hebrew psalmist expresses such anguish in ways that touch the raw, visceral depths of human experience: *“All my bones shall say, O Lord . . .” (Ps 35:10)*.

Another Hebrew word that signifies mercy is *hesed*, which can be translated as steadfast love, loving kindness, even loyalty. As expressed by the **Psalm for this Sunday**: *“For great is his steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever” (Ps 117:2)*. Thus, mercy is not simply an instinctive movement of goodness, but a conscious, freely-willed response, a choice made because it is the right thing to do. We see this choice for mercy freely exercised in today’s **First Reading** from Acts 4:32-35, where the disciples share their resources so that no one is left needy. Likewise, the **Second Reading** (1 Jn 5:1-6) accentuates the link between the love of God and the resolve to live God’s commandments.

The Scriptures repeatedly tell us that God, forever faithful and compassionate, is moved by the predicament of God’s people and reaches out, drawing them out of isolation and entrapment, relieving pain and restoring to wholeness. This is beautifully expressed in today’s **Gospel** about Thomas’ struggle to believe in the truth of the resurrection (Jn 20:19-31). With compassion and tactile invitation, Jesus reaches out to Thomas in his grief and invites his closeness, his touch, his healing, his faith.

Time and again in the Hebrew Scriptures, in both masculine and feminine imagery, we see the face of a tender God turned towards those in need of comfort, rescue, healing. God who is merciful uplifts on eagles’ wings, cherishes, nurtures, protects and does battle on behalf of the children of Israel.

*“I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down and fed them (Hosea 11:4)*. God signals personal, active presence through messengers, angels, cloud, fire, God raises up leaders and responds to hunger and thirst with lifegiving rains, water from rock, manna and miracles.

# LIGHT OF TORAH

In the midst of this great tradition that speaks of divine mercy, emerges Jesus. Through Jewish eyes and ears, Jesus sees and hears the predicament of the people, as well as the cry of the individual in the crowd. As a faithful Jew, he is moved with compassion, at times with great sighs and tears. His Torah-based worldview leads him to act, with healing words and deeds. He encourages, challenges, praises, forgives. He spends himself in service, in teaching, and is unafraid of robust engagement with the 'other'.

According to Christian belief, mercy has a name, a face, a voice: Jesus Christ, Word made flesh, Divine Mercy Incarnate. In proclaiming Christ as merciful Saviour, Son of God, we acknowledge with gratitude the epic story of God's everlasting love affair with the Jewish people; it fuels our own Christian story and continues to speak to us today.

In the words of Pope Benedict:

"Christ, the Son of God, became flesh in a people, a faith tradition and a culture which, if better known, can only enrich the understanding of the Christian faith. Christians have come to this deeper understanding thanks to the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Lk 24:26). But they must always be aware of and grateful for their roots. For the shoot grafted onto the ancient tree to take (cf. Rom 11:17-18), it needs the sap rising from the roots." (Apostolic Exhortation, [Ecclesia in Medio Oriente](#), 21.)

One of the benefits of highlighting mercy as part of the Hebrew Scriptures and Judaism is that it helps to dismantle persistent elements of the 'teaching of contempt', whereby Judaism was once depicted as a merciless, legalistic religion focused on an Old Testament God of wrath and revenge. In such a distorted view, Jesus enters the scene almost as "inventing" mercy out of the blue. Without denying the uniqueness of the presence and mission of Jesus as Messiah and the Son of God, Christians can and should readily affirm the tradition and Scriptures which shaped Jesus of Nazareth, who was born, lived and died a Jew. God's everlasting kindness, mercy and compassion remain key elements of Jewish and Christian teaching today (and Islam, too, where among the names of God are found *Al-Rahman*, "Most Compassionate" and *Al-Rahim*, "Most Merciful").

## Notable Ecclesial Texts

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### **Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews**

"The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf. Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40)." [1974 "[Guidelines](#)", II, III]

### **Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews**

"Fully and completely human, a Jew of his time, descendant of Abraham, son of David, shaped by the whole tradition of Israel, heir of the prophets, Jesus stands in continuity with his people and its history. . . . "This recourse to the Abrahamic covenant is so essentially constitutive of the Christian faith that the Church without Israel would be in danger of losing its locus in the history of salvation." [["Gifts and Calling"](#), 14, 33]

### **Pope Benedict XVI**

"Christians ought to become more conscious of the depth of the mystery of the Incarnation in order to love God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their might (cf. Dt 6:5). Christ, the Son of God, became flesh in a people, a faith tradition and a culture which, if better known, can only enrich the understanding of the Christian faith. Christians have come to this deeper understanding thanks to the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Lk 24:26). But they must always be aware of and grateful for their roots. For the shoot grafted onto the ancient tree to take (cf. Rom 11:17-18), it needs the sap rising from the roots." [2012 Apostolic Exhortation, [Ecclesia in Medio Oriente](#), 21]

# LIGHT OF TORAH

\* These reflections by Teresa Pirola, 2021, are an adaptation of her work in: *River of Mercy, Streams of Joy: Reflections in the Jubilee Year of Mercy* (CSO Catholic Diocese of Broken Bay, 2016). Scripture: NRSV.