



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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The merciful nature of God's judgement

1. In Psalm 116 we read: "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful" (v. 5). At first sight judgement and mercy would seem to be two irreconcilable realities, or at least, the second seems to be connected with the first only if it mitigates its own inexorable power. It is necessary instead to understand the logic of Sacred Scripture, which links them and indeed presents them in a way that one cannot exist without the other.

In the Old Testament the sense of divine justice is perceived gradually, beginning with the situation of one who has acted well and feels unjustly threatened. He then finds refuge and defence in God. This experience is expressed several times in the Psalms which, for example, state: "I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the afflicted, and executes justice for the needy. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall dwell in your presence" (Ps 140:13-14).

Scripture conceives of intervention on behalf of the oppressed primarily as justice, that is, as God's fidelity to the saving promises made to Israel. God's justice is therefore one which stems from the gratuitous and merciful initiative by which he bound himself to his people in an eternal covenant. God is just because he saves, thus fulfilling his promises, while the judgement of sin and the wicked is only a secondary aspect of his mercy. The sinner who has sincerely repented can always trust in this merciful justice (cf. Ps 51:6, 16).

Regarding the difficulty of finding justice in human beings and their institutions, there is a growing awareness in the Bible that justice will only be fully realized in the future, through the action of a mysterious figure who will gradually assume more precise "messianic" features: a king or a king's

son (cf. Ps 72:1), a shoot that "will come forth from the stump of Jesse" (Is 11:1), a "righteous branch", a descendant of David (Jer 23:5).

2. The figure of the Messiah, foreshadowed in many passages, especially in the prophetic books, assumes in the perspective of salvation the functions of governance and judgement for the prosperity and growth of the community and its individual members.

The judicial function will be exercised over the good and the wicked, who will appear together for judgement, where the triumph of the just will become fear and amazement for the wicked (cf. Wis 4:20-5:23; cf. also Dn 12:1-3). The effect of the judgement entrusted to the "Son of man", in the apocalyptic vision of the book of Daniel, will be the triumph of the holy people of the Most High over the downfall of earthly kingdoms (cf. Dn 7, especially vv. 18 and 27).

On the other hand, even those who can expect a favourable judgement are aware of their own limits. Thus there is a growing sense that it is impossible to be just without divine grace, as the Psalmist recalls: "O Lord ... in your justice answer me. Enter not into judgement with your servant, for before you no living man is just" (Ps 143:1-2).

3. We find the same basic logic again in the New Testament, where divine judgement is linked to Christ's saving work.

Jesus is the Son of man to whom the Father has given the power to judge. He will pass judgement on all who will come forth from their tombs, separating those destined for the resurrection of life from those who will experience the resurrection of judgement (cf. Jn 5:26-30). However, as the Evangelist John stresses: "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (3:17). Only those who will have rejected the salvation offered by God in his boundless mercy will be condemned, because they will have condemned themselves.

4. St Paul delves into the salvific meaning of this concept of "the justice of God" which is accomplished "through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Rom 3:22). The justice of God is closely connected with the gift of reconciliation; if we are reconciled with the Father through Christ, we too, through him, can become the justice of God (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-21).

Judgement and mercy can thus be understood as two dimensions of the same mystery of love: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all" (Rom 11:32). Love, which is the basis of the divine attitude and must become a fundamental virtue for the believer, thus prompts us to have trust in the day of judgement, casting out all fear (cf. 1 Jn 4:18). In imitation of this divine judgement, human judgement must also be exercised according to a law of freedom, in which it is precisely mercy that must prevail: "Always speak and act as those destined for judgement under the law of freedom. Merciless is the judgement on the one who has

not shown mercy; but mercy triumphs over judgement" (Jas 2:12-13).

5. God is the Father of mercy and of all consolation. For this reason in the fifth request of the prayer par excellence, the Our Father, "our petition begins with a "confession" of our wretchedness and his mercy" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2839). In revealing the fullness of the Father's mercy to us, Jesus also taught us that we only have access to this Father, so just and merciful, through the experience of that mercy which must mark our relations with our neighbour. "This outpouring of mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us.... In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and their hardness makes them impervious to the Father's merciful love" (*CCC*, n. 2840).

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I extend a particular welcome to the various groups of Religious Sisters and Brothers engaged in renewal courses. May you be strengthened in your distinctive witness to the pre-eminence of God in all things and to his love for every creature. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada and the United States, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Lord.