

**The Shakespeare Sermon: The Quality of Mercy. 28th April 2019
(Easter 2), Stratford-upon-Avon parish church, 11. 15 am**

Luke 18.1-8

What on earth was Jesus doing when he paralleled God's response to prayer to the actions of an unjust judge?

And what on earth was Shakespeare doing when he invented the character of the Duke of Vienna?

When Shakespeare wrote his play of mercy and justice, *Measure for Measure*, he gave us a kind of God-figure who ran all the action in the background and manipulated his way towards a sort of happy ending. This God-figure – as some critics see him, anyway – was the Duke of Vienna. I am afraid to say that really he was not very satisfactory. He was a man who couldn't face sorting out the mess his justice system was in for himself, but put a brittle deputy in to do it for him. And he knew it wasn't going to work – that his brittle deputy, a man called Angelo, had neither self-knowledge nor wisdom, and was more or less bound to mess up - so the Duke hung around in disguise to pick up the pieces when it all went wrong.

You heard Angelo just now, telling a woman pleading for her brother's life that it wasn't in his power to dispense mercy. But we can tell that it's not anything like that simple; and in fact Angelo is working himself up to a point where he will offer to bend the law in exchange for sexual favours from her. In a society soaked through by the habits of sexual licence and widespread exploitation, Angelo is not as untouched by the atmosphere as he hopes. Just as the Duke evaded his responsibilities as judge on the grounds that he had been tainted by his own laxity and lost his authority, so Angelo has been differently affected by a prevailing atmosphere of moral neglect. He is willing to see a woman's need merely in terms of what he can get out of it for himself – and, it turns out, not for the first time. He is an unjust judge, put into post by another, differently unjust judge. Not much hope for those who plead in this court, apparently. No divine justice to see here.

The generation of literary critics who wanted the Duke to be a sort of fair-minded God-figure had seen a seductively neat solution to the human mess which was the court and city of Vienna in the world of Shakespeare's play. It's just that it happened not to work very well, because the Duke was part of the mess. On top of that, he was a sort of moral coward, in fact someone who saw clearly

that he was *not* a God-figure and yet who was required by his function to offer judgement on others as if he was. Every lawgiver lives with his or her inadequacy in role, but most ask for necessary forgiveness rather than running away from the responsibility.

Shakespeare was actually interested, not so much in the zero-sum game of patterns of retribution, but in what happens when the web of relationships human beings make between them touches everything they do and everything they are. So in *Measure for Measure*, which advertises itself as being about retributory patterns, he actually wrote a play where no one had pure motives or actions, tainting the justice system along with the whole of the rest of the society. And, by the end, while nothing quite got broken, nothing quite got restored, either. The wisest remark in the whole play is made by a minor character, Mariana, who, having had a fairly raw deal throughout the action, gets married to the unsatisfactory Angelo at the end. Asked how she feels about this, she replies, 'I crave no other, nor no better man'. Fortunately for Angelo, love isn't about being good enough to deserve it.

And the disciples of Jesus, who once asked him in a bothered sort of way why he told people stories all the time that they had to wrestle with and try to understand, had the same sort of problem as the literary critics who longed for Shakespeare to be a bit more neat-minded about his outcomes. It would have been nice, the disciples felt, if Jesus had just told people what they ought to do. But Jesus wouldn't. The stories he told, which we call parables, were invitations to step into the complex web of human relationships and look at them with the eye of love. And it wasn't going to be easy. There weren't 'shazam' kinds of moments where you could say, 'look, there is God doing his stuff'. So he told stories about an employer who paid the same wages to men working for half an hour as to men who had worked eight hours in the heat of the day; about a useless and betraying younger son who was welcomed as a hero over against his dutiful and righteous older brother; about a shepherd who didn't mind putting his whole flock of sheep in danger to search out one who had got lost; about a woman who received justice from a lazy and corrupt lawgiver just because he got bored with her nagging at him.

These are not the sorts of decisions which inform well-run law courts. They are something else. They are decisions about relationships, and what makes relationships live. They cut across

calculation and dispassionate assessment and go straight to the spring of human feeling. You could never turn Jesus's stories into systems for living – though people have tried. They don't codify, because they are not about law. They are about being known. They expose the secrets of the heart. They are about mercy.

Mercy, said the atheist writer Terry Pratchett, is invented by the guilty, because they know they need it. Only the righteous survive justice. Yet when we worship God, we recognise mercy in him as a primary attribute. Is this because he is an unjust judge? Well; yes; in a way. If it is unjust to forget wrongdoing and put away guilt, then God, mercifully, is unjust. Divine judgment exposes everything we are, so that we become, in the words of St Paul, 'fully known'. But to be fully known and yet still loved is what human beings long for in every relationship. The widow who pesters the unjust judge is asking to be seen and heard, as our prayers ask to be seen and heard when we make them. There is a freedom in being brought into the light, whatever else gets exposed at the same time.

Shakespearean mercy, too, is the mercy of exposure. When Isabella pleads with Angelo, she says to him

*How would you be,
If He, which is the top of judgment, should
But judge you as you are? O, think on that;
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
Like man new made.*

She knows her Lord's Prayer. *Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.* She knows the story of the woman taken in adultery and brought before Jesus. Jesus looks away, writes in the sand, and then says, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone' – and her accusers, self-condemned, melt away. (*John 8.1-11*). Without mercy, who can survive?

In one of Shakespeare's final plays, the figure of the magician who has thrown away his power and his magic closes the illusory world of the imagined island. His name is Prospero. He tells us he has no strength to hold our gaze or trick our minds. He tells us that he cannot avoid being fully known. And so he asks his audience for mercy, reminding them that they need it too. It seems the right place to end a Shakespeare sermon:

*....Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,*

*And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.*

Lord Jesus Christ, only son of the Father, have mercy on us.