

Today's psalm contains one of my favourite Bible verses.

Mercy and truth are met together;

Righteousness and peace have kissed each other. (Psalm 85.10)

It is the imagery of mercy and truth meeting and righteousness and peace kissing that speaks to me. These four weighty words mercy and truth, righteousness and peace aren't opposites, but aren't to my knowledge often combined in this creative way, in this godly way tempering principles such as truth and righteousness that standing on their own might only be hard. There are hard truths...

Again mercy and truth meet. Righteousness and peace kiss. Let's think this through a bit more. If you only ever spoke of truth and righteousness and never added mercy and peace into the mix you could imagine yourself ending up in a rather cold and harsh world beaten down by people weaponising truth and righteousness for themselves and their communities never being tempered by mercy and peace. Religious gatherings and communities, but also political movements are often regarded in this way as being cold and harsh. In the Jewish and Christian world both truth and righteousness do not stand alone; they are on the same level with mercy and peace. These balance each other. They temper each other.

Let's return to the word picture. Mercy and truth meet. Righteousness and peace kiss. These four weighty words are placed in close proximity to each other. This is not accidental, but intentional. Whoever wrote these words and Psalm 85 was informed by and nurtured in a living faith community dedicated to and living out of the reality of the living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with an understanding that these words as being relation to an another. There is one further thing that I would like you to note and this is how truth and righteousness are bracketed, **are bracketed** by mercy and peace. Sentences are linear. One word follows another and the ordering of the words in verse 10 is not accidental, but deliberate. This ordering of the words gives direction to how we are to understand them. It enhances what this one verse of the Psalter is communicating.

As we know the psalms are a unique form of ancient poetry. One of the best known techniques employed in the psalms is parallelism. We speak of parallel psalms and there are different categories: synonymous, contrasting and comparative. My point is that the psalms are careful constructs in which the author seeks to meet certain literary criteria informed by his faith in the living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, Samuel and Isaiah, the God of Ananias, who laid hands on Paul that he might regain his sight and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The God who makes himself known, but who also as the psalms testify is silent for long periods of time.

Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted. Psalm 80.14-15

God calls us to a truthful witness, tempered by mercy. God calls us to righteousness tempered by peace. Those who seek the mercy of God for themselves need to receive and embrace mercy not only for themselves, but in all their interactions with others and indeed the whole of God's creation as trustworthy stewards. Those who seek to be righteous need to do so in ways that allow for peace to extend to individuals and the community. Where righteousness is strident, where truth claims are not tempered by the crown of mercy and are not striving for peace, that peace which only God can give, there will be discord and strife.

Two images come to mind as I consider Psalm 85.10.

Mercy and truth are met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

The first image is of a seesaw. Remember when you last sat on a seesaw? Yes? No? Why I thought of a seesaw is because you need a partner to balance the seesaw, so that it is perfectly level and still. This balancing of the seesaw was something I enjoyed doing with friends some years ago... Depending on your weight you moved up and down the seesaw so that the plank was level your feet no longer touching the ground. This is what mercy and truth accomplish as they both take up their ends of the seesaw. They create an equilibrium. They keep each other in balance. They do not cancel each other out. But they are held in balance. The creative tension of which I sometimes speak.

Let's stay with the image of mercy and truth perfectly balanced. What are they doing as they sit perfectly balanced, as they face each other, looking at each other and into each other. They are meeting! Now we could do exactly the same with righteousness and peace. Seeing them taking up their seats at either end of the seesaw. In each case we are not favouring one or the other, nor are we collapsing them into one another. In truth these four categories/attributes/concepts are in an ongoing conversation with each other, informing one another, enriching one another, urging one another on...

The other image that came to mind was that of these four being intertwined with one another. I thought initially of a vine, but the image of a rope seemed stronger as the four threads mercy and truth, righteousness and peace are wound together. My home town is a harbour city. In my mind's eye I see the big boats, oil tankers and container ships being moored to their respective piers with mighty ropes. Ropes strong yet flexible with give but not in danger of losing their mooring. The rope is strong because the threads are bound together. Remember the song, Bind us together Lord with cords that cannot be broken? In the song the cords are the cords of love, but what is the cord of love if it is not enriched, seasoned by mercy, truth, righteousness and peace? Without mercy, truth and righteousness there is little chance of a meaningful peace in which true love might flourish. There may be a truce, but that is not peace. A truce is a cessation from conflict. There might even be love, but what kind of love. Love needs to be defined. It needs to be defined by our Jewish Christian heritage, a living Tradition which we embrace and live out of.

As I said above the four weighty words that we have been considering together aren't often brought into this unique combination, which to use one more metaphor should be thought of as a conversation or if you prefer a dance. Mercy and truth, righteousness and peace circling around each forever forming new and intricate patterns. Mercy is a unique attribute/quality of human existence. We learn mercy through the example of others. We learn mercy here in this place because we walk with a God who makes himself known as being merciful as we live out of God's truth made known in Jesus Christ.

One of the difficult things for us as humans is to think about is how God takes up his home in our humanity, as we profess in the Nicene Creed "was incarnate from the

Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man". At an Early Church Council, the Council of Chalcedon, a definition was found and promulgated. The definition was concerned with how the two natures human and divine in Christ could be thought by mortals as being truly man created and truly God uncreated as residing in one body.

I mention Chalcedon because this verse that we have been labouring through, one of my favourite verses in Holy Writ, is also about Jesus, because where mercy and truth meet, righteousness and peace kiss, we are in something not unlike the presence of the divine. These four meet wonderfully and for our sakes in Jesus Christ. This verse of the psalms points to Jesus in his simplicity and complexity. Not only does God become our mercy and our truth, our righteousness and our peace in Jesus Christ, but these four take up their home in Christ, while inspiring us to follow his example and to become ourselves vessels of mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, while always having proper regard for each other, that in the words of the psalm we turn not again to folly, that God's glory may dwell in our land, that our land may yield its increase, while our steps are directed in the way, "as we go forward on our journey with the God of our pilgrimage".*

End

*(Note for the reader, the last phrase leans on the post communion collect for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, Common Worship pasted below)

God of our pilgrimage,
you have led us to the living water:
refresh and sustain us
as we go forward on our journey,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.