

Homily, 28 April 2019  
Second Sunday of Easter  
Divine Mercy Sunday

*Acts 5:12-16; Psalms 118:2-4,13-15,22-24; Revelation 1:9-11a,12-13,17-19; John 20:19-31*



Today we celebrate the *Second Sunday of Easter* and also *Divine Mercy Sunday*. It was given that designation twenty years ago by Pope John Paul.

Every year, on the second Sunday of Easter as we sing psalm 118 we say three times "*His mercy endures forever.*"

God's mercy gives us hope. In the reading from Acts, it gave hope to the sick and to the troubled. In the reading from Revelation, it gives us hope for eternal life. In the Gospel it gives us hope for forgiveness and peace.

But what exactly is mercy?



When someone offends you ... does you wrong ... and yet you choose forgiveness instead of justice, you have shown mercy to that person.

Both justice and mercy are good things, but they are not the same. Justice, which is a virtue, is the firm desire to give someone his due.

- Paying someone a living wage for honest work is an act of justice.
- Imposing a fair punishment for an offense is an act of justice.

Mercy, on the other hand, is the judgment that given the circumstances, forgiveness ought to supersede justice. It is an act of kindness and compassion ... and often an act of wisdom.



And yet we realize that we don't deserve what God has in store for us:

- God love us and yet we ignore him; we disobey him; we reject him.
- We are all God's children and yet we are indifferent to our fellow men; we are unjust; we injure; we offend.

We are sinners. Therefore we should expect justice, but instead we receive divine mercy.

But in his mercy God isn't blind and he isn't unjust. He knows the darkness that is in each of us. In his mercy he doesn't ignore sin and evil.

Mercy is an undeserved gift, but it is not given arbitrarily. It is given to those who will accept it, to those who know they need it. Mercy is shown to the sorrowful and the contrite ... to anyone who longs for forgiveness.



John Newton, the Englishman who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace* understood Divine Mercy. He committed acts of *great* evil, though he never broke the laws of his country.

As a young man, Newton worked for nine years in the African slave trade; eventually serving as the captain of several slave ships.

He was responsible for the deaths of thousands upon thousands of human beings. He killed them by cruel indifference and neglect. Those he didn't kill he delivered into slavery, knowing full well that their lives would be brutal and short.

It's ironic that during those years, he became a Christian. His conversion happened during a severe storm that almost sank his ship. He professed his belief in Christ and asked God to take control of his life.

Yet by his own admission, he didn't, at that time, really know Christ. He wasn't ready for mercy. He still worked in the slave trade.

Eventually he came to recognize the evil he had done. It seems that God does not always work by sudden storms, but sometimes by gentle drizzle: drip ... drip ... drip.

Forced to give up the slave trade after a stroke, he became a lay preacher, a noted hymn writer and was eventually ordained an Anglican priest. Late in life he joined William Wilberforce in the Abolitionist cause in England.



Several years ago there was a movie made about the long quest of William Wilberforce to end the British slave trade.

In the movie, which was called "*Amazing Grace*," there is a meeting between the young man, William Wilberforce, and the old man, John Newton.

In the scene, William goes to see John and finds him dressed in sackcloth, mopping the stone floors of his old church. More than thirty years after leaving the slave trade, he is still doing penance.

William is there because he needs advice and spiritual direction from his old parish priest.

*"When I was younger," said William, "you told me that you live in the company of 20,000 ghosts ... the ghosts of slaves."*

John stopped mopping and gave him a hard look ... *"I was explaining to a child why a grown man cowers in a dark corner."*

*"I need you to tell me about them," William explains, "because the Prime Minister has asked me to take them on: the slavers."*

*"I'm the last person you should come to for advice," John replies.*

*"I can't even say the name of any of my ships without being back on board them in my head. All I know is twenty thousand slaves live with me in this little church. There's still blood on my hands."*



*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.'*



It is through grace that we understand our sins and the justice we are due. In that moment our hearts do fear.

Yet through that same grace, we also understand Divine Mercy, and we have hope.

*Amazing Grace* is a song about Divine Mercy.

John Newton wrote it because he knew he was a sinner. Though he repented and worked to end the slave trade, he knew there was nothing he could do to undo the evil he had done.

Jesus died on the cross for John Newton, and for you, and for me. He atoned for our sins, that we might have life and hope.



God is kind and merciful and *his mercy endures forever*. Always have faith that God can forgive you, even when it seems you can never forgive yourself. That is the lesson of John Newton.

Writing about his past sins, John Newton said, "*It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.*"

Many people have a dark place somewhere in their past, though hopefully not as dark as John Newton's. For some, that place can become a prison. But for those who believe in Jesus Christ and the atonement of the cross, such places are not prisons. We can leave those dark places because we have a living hope given to us by God.

*That is Divine Mercy.*