

May Word of Life

‘But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ’ (Eph. 2:4-5).

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When the Lord God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai he declared his identity as: ‘The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’ (Ex 34:6). To indicate the nature of this merciful love, the Hebrew Bible uses a word (*raḥûmîm*) that recalls a mother’s womb, the place where life begins. By making himself known as ‘merciful’, God shows that for each thing he has made he is concerned as a mother is for her child. He cares, is near, protects, looks after his creature. The Bible uses a further term (*ḥesed*) to express other aspects of this love which is mercy: faithfulness, benevolence, goodness, solidarity.

Mary in her Magnificat too sings of the Almighty’s mercy that is from generation to generation (see Lk 1:50).

Jesus himself spoke to us of God’s love, revealing him as a ‘Father’ close and attentive to our every necessity, keen to pardon, to give all we need: ‘he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’ (Mt 5:45).

His love is truly ‘rich’ and ‘great’, as is said in the letter to the Ephesians that give us our Word of Life:

‘But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.’

What Paul says here is almost a cry of joy born of the contemplation of the extraordinary thing God has done for us. We were dead and he revived us, giving us a new life.

The words begin with ‘but’, indicating a contrast with what Paul pointed out earlier. This was the tragic condition of humanity crushed beneath its wrongdoing and sins, prisoner of selfish and wicked desires, under the influence of the powers of evil, in open rebellion against God. In this situation it would have deserved God’s wrath (see Eph 2:1-3). In contrast God, instead of punishing – hence Paul’s utter amazement – gives humanity life again. God does not let himself be governed by wrath, but by mercy and by love.

Jesus had already suggested that God acts like this when he told the parable of the Prodigal Son, the younger brother who was welcomed back by his father with open arms after he had sunk into an inhuman life. It was the same with the parable of the Good Shepherd who goes in

search for the lost sheep and puts it on his shoulders to bring it back home. And the same can be seen in the Good Samaritan who cares for the wounds of the man who had fallen into the hands of robbers (see Lk 15:11-32; 3-7; 10:30-37).

God, a merciful father, symbolized in the parables, has not only forgiven us, but he has given us life itself in his son Jesus, that is, given us the fullness of divine life.

And this leads to a hymn of gratitude:

'But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.'

This Word of Life ought to make us feel the same joy and gratitude as Paul and the first Christian community. To each one of us, too, God shows himself 'rich in mercy' and of 'great love', ready to forgive and grant trust again. There is no situation of sin, of suffering, of solitude, where he does not make himself present, does not come alongside us to go with us on our way, does not grant us trust, the possibility of rising up and the strength to start again.

At his first 'Angelus', on 17 March two years ago, Pope Francis started speaking about the mercy of God, a theme that has become characteristic for him. At that time he said, 'God's face is the face of a merciful father who is always patient ... he understands us, he waits for us, he does not tire of forgiving us.' He ended that first brief greeting with the words, 'He is the loving Father who always pardons, who has that heart of mercy for us all. And let us too learn to be merciful to everyone.'

This points to a practical way to live the Word of Life.

If God for us is rich in mercy and of great love, we too are called to be merciful towards others. If he loves those who are bad, who are his enemies, we too ought to learn how to love those who are not 'lovable', even our enemies. Did not Jesus tell us, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy' (Mt 5:7)? Did he not ask us to be 'merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36)? Paul too invites his communities, chosen and loved by God, to clothe themselves 'with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience' (Col 3:12).

If we have believed in God's love, we too can love in our turn with that love which makes us draw close to every situation of pain and need, that forgives all things, that protects, that knows how to look after the other person.

Living in this way we will be able to give witness to God's love and help those we meet discover that also for them God is rich in mercy and of great love.

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