

Week 1: GOD IN ANGLICAN WORSHIP

1. God of Mercy	1
2. Holy Communion Service in A Prayer Book for Australia (APBA: 1995)	3
3. The Covenant of Mercy	5
a) Old Testament	5
b) New Testament	7
4. Why so important?	8
5. Just as God is merciful, so are we to be.	9
6. Discussion	10

Each group of Christians, it might be fair to assume, emphasises something valid of the immensity of God or group of attributes (and thereby will often de-emphasise the revelation of God in some other respects). To say how God is represented in Anglicanism might be thought presumptuous to we who are not professional theologians. However, I think we may have rough ideas of what that view might be for it is unfolded week by week in the liturgy¹.

Some might say that God as revealed in Anglicanism is a God Who Speaks. Others might say that because the liturgy emphasises the Written Word of God so much – we listen to it from the OT, the Psalms, and the letters, followed by the Gospel pre-eminently. Then we hear the spoken Word in the sermon or homily. Another worthwhile suggestion for an attribute of God emphasised in the Holy Communion is his Holiness (see A Prayer Book for Australia: APBA, 1995: 121). The Trinitarian character of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit would certainly also qualify as another candidate. (In any case, it should not be thought that these representations of God and others besides are unconnected.)

1. God of Mercy

But my simple suggestion is that God is revealed in the Anglican Liturgy as the God of salvation²³ (“saved by grace through faith” Eph. 2:8, see Articles of Religion VI) and for Anglicans at the core of salvation is the attribute of God’s **mercy**.

¹ Liturgy for Anglicanism has a certain precedence over doctrine. And by taking an active part in liturgy one learns doctrine.

² “For us and for our salvation, He [the Son] came down from heaven” (Nicaea Creed).

³ Unfortunately, Anglicans are not agreed about salvation, why we need it and what is its nature but Jesus said he came to save sinners (Mk 10.45) and St Paul repeated that claiming to be the chief of sinners (1Tim 1.15). See under “4. Why important” section.

At a surface level, mercy is compassion, pity, sympathy, and even affection for the one who has been made miserable by some adverse situation. Mercy does not stop with feelings of sympathy though but acts to remedy the painful situation. At the divine level, mercy is the fruit of God's **covenantal** word to act faithfully even when his people go astray.

As a foretaste of where I am going with this suggestion of mercy, we may listen to the word of God in Exodus 20 after Israel has been delivered from Egypt where the Ten Commandments⁴ are given. In the giving of the second commandment about the making of graven images, the text reads,

4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

6 And shewing **mercy** unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

These conditions are covenantal stipulations. A covenant is a binding act or agreement usually made between equals. Marriage ideally is such a covenant in this sense. However, in the Bible, God's covenants come from God's initiative to those he chooses to be in covenant with such as Abram/Abraham for example. Later in the New Testament (NT) we hear from the lips of Jesus at the last supper in Luke (22: 19-20),

19 And he [Jesus] took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

20 Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament [covenant] in my blood, which is shed for you. (KJV)

So, the important theme of Covenant in the OT is continued in the NT. Salvation and mercy are covenantal terms, not just for Israel (Jews) as we find out but for all the peoples of the world.

⁴ We refer to these every Sunday, often in Jesus' words but occasionally in the full list.

2. Holy Communion Service in A Prayer Book for Australia (APBA: 1995)

This **mercy**⁵ theme can be followed through the APBA (1995) Holy Communion, 2nd Order Service as one example. After we hear the Law (p. 210) and then are called to “confess our sins in penitence and faith, confident in God’s forgiveness” our confession begins with the words,

Merciful God, our Maker and our Judge,
We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed:
We have not loved you with our whole heart,
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves;
We repent, and are sorry for all our sins.
Father, forgive us.
Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

At the bottom of the same page (p. 210), we say Kyrie eleison,
Lord have **mercy**, Christ have **mercy**, Lord have **mercy**.

On the next page, in the middle of the *Gloria* we hear
have **mercy** on us.
If during Advent and Lent, the Trisagion is said then we hear,
Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal,
Have **mercy** on us.

In *The Prayers of the People* (section 19, p. 124), in two of the responses either the intercessory leader or the people remind us all of God’s mercy,

Lord, in your **mercy**
Hear our prayer.

Let us pray to the **Lord**.
Lord have mercy.

If the Confession and Absolution are used at section 22 (p. 126) then that presentation begins with the priest saying,

⁵ Of course, I am not suggesting that a simple word count will resolve the question I have raised. See below.

God is steadfast in love and infinite in **mercy**, welcoming sinners and inviting them to the Lord's table.

However, as we come to the Lord's table, the song of the mercy of God becomes yet louder. In the familiar *Prayer of Approach* (see APBA, p. 125)⁶

We do not presume to come to this your table, **merciful** Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great **mercies**. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have **mercy**. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. Amen.

Of the different forms of *The Great Thanksgiving* given, the first three of the five have a direct reference to God's **mercy** (pp. 128, 130 [even mentions a covenant of **mercy**], 134).

Much of these references to mercy are based on a continuation of this theme from the Book of Common Prayer (BCP: 1662). And if we examine *A General Confession* used in the service of *Morning Prayer* in the BCP we find,

ALMIGHTY and most **merciful** Father;
We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws.
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done;
And there is no health in us.
But thou, O Lord, have **mercy** upon us, miserable offenders.
Spare thou them, O God, who confess their faults.
Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.
And grant, O most **merciful** Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

When one examines this word **mercy** as used in the scriptures – and Anglicanism is nothing without the Holy Scriptures – we find why 'mercy' has been chosen to be so central (in my reckoning at any rate). In the Old Testament (OT) the usual word for mercy as translated in the *King James Version* (KJV: 1611) was *chesed* (kes-ed). Everyone agrees that this Hebrew word has no equivalent in English and so has been

⁶ The way I remember the two different Australian prayer book acronyms of An Australian Prayer Book (AAPB: 1978) and A Prayer Book for Australia (APBA: 1995) is that AA comes before AP.

variously translated, ‘loving-kindness’ (Coverdale⁷ Bible, 1535), ‘steadfast love’, ‘compassion’, ‘mercy’ and sometimes ‘goodness’. However, as with many things important, the issue of *chesed* is more complicated.⁸

3. The Covenant of Mercy (see APBA p. 130)

The word *chesed* and its variants (*hesed*, *cheched*) are used about 250 times in the OT predominantly in the Psalms (125 times). Interestingly, the word *chesed* is only used (in Genesis 19, in reference to Lot) after God makes covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 and tends to be used with words as faithfulness, truth, loyalty, commitment, and devotion – all covenantal terms. The indications are that *chesed* (mercy & other words above) signals the presence of covenant obligations: God will fulfil his word to his people because God is faithful to his promises despite the failings of those in covenant with him. In other words, God’s covenant is a gracious one.

a) Old Testament

This framework of *covenantal faithfulness* is well illustrated in Deuteronomy 7 (v.9-10),

9 Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;

10 And repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face.

Now I know we have the tendency today not to read or consider verse 10 but it is part of the revelation. I don’t think we can do that and say we are honestly dealing with the text. However, I would also point out that we don’t know whether God’s repaying of those who hate him is eternal. C. S. Lewis once quipped that those who go to perdition do so by their own free will. Be that as it may, this passage in Deuteronomy presents God as the faithful God as does this important passage in Exodus 34 where God revealed himself again to Moses after the Israel falls into the worship of the golden calf,

⁷ Miles Coverdale (1488-1569), the famous early bible translator who produced the first complete printed translation of the bible, coined this word as a translation for *chesed*.

⁸ Note: Modern translations often translate the Hebrew for mercy as “steadfast love” and “long-kindness”.

⁶And the LORD passed by before him [Moses], and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,
⁷Keeping ['maintaining' NIV⁹] mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation (KJV).

Neither is it only the Pentateuch (the Five Books of Moses) that presents God in this way, but it is particularly dominant in the Psalms¹⁰. For example, Psalms (86:5, 15, KJV),

⁵For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.

¹⁵But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, long suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.

And then in the wonderful Psalm 103 (KJV),

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:
³Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;
⁴Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies;
⁵Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.
⁶The LORD executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed.
⁷He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel.
⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy [steadfast love, RSV¹¹].
⁹He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever.
¹⁰He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
¹¹For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.
¹²As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.
¹³Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him.
¹⁴For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.
¹⁵As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth.
¹⁶For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.
¹⁷But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children;
¹⁸To such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them.
¹⁹The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.
²⁰Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word.
²¹Bless ye the LORD, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure.
²²Bless the LORD, all his works in all places of his dominion: bless the LORD, O my soul.

And then in the prophet Micah (7:18-20) we read,

¹⁸Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy [*chesed*] ('steadfast love' RSV).

¹⁹He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

⁹ New International Version

¹⁰ See also Psalms (51; 103; 118 [repetition]; 123; 136 [repetition]; 145:8-9).

¹¹ Revised Standard Version

²⁰Thou wilt perform the truth [faithfulness] to Jacob, and the **mercy** [steadfast love] to Abraham, which thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old.

b) New Testament

Mercy appears 58 times on my count in the New Testament. Obviously all of these occurrences cannot be dealt so we will concentrate on the gospel according to St Luke because Luke (a Gentile!) strongly suggests the idea of the covenantal faithfulness of God to his people. Significantly from the first chapter, *mercy* features in both the Song of Mary (*The Magnificat*) and the Song of Zechariah (*Benedictus*). In both you should catch the covenantal mercy context. In the Magnificat we hear,

⁵⁰And his **mercy** is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

⁵⁴He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his **mercy**;

⁵⁵As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

From Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist we hear,

⁶⁷And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people,

⁶⁹And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David;

⁷⁰As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began:

⁷¹That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;

⁷²To perform the **mercy** promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant;

⁷³The oath which he swore to our father Abraham,

⁷⁴That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear,

⁷⁵In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

⁷⁶And thou, child [John], shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;

⁷⁷To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,

⁷⁸Through the tender **mercy** of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,

⁷⁹To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

We see these qualities demonstrated in Luke 17 and 18 where we meet first the healing of the 10 lepers, then the Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and then later the healing of the blind man. It's instructive to observe what they call out to Jesus in the first instance. Their cry for help indicates the basis for their appeal to Jesus. In Luke 17 the group calls out, "Jesus, Master [Rabbi or Teacher], have mercy on us!" Lepers were outcasts as we know. No one had anything to do with them so the only way they could get close to Jesus we imagine was in this out of the way place.

They all stood at a distance from Jesus because that was the proper thing to do. In this leper group at least one of them is a *Samaritan* which is to be doubly cursed. Yet they cry as one group. Jesus heals them all including the Samaritan. Luke invariably had his eye upon Jesus interactions with those not considered to be part of Israel's heritage.

The parable in Luke 18 records the tax collector "standing far off" and not even lifting up his eyes to heaven but beating his breast with the words, "God be merciful to me a sinner". And we know that his words have been used by countless millions since! Sin is lawbreaking or a missing of the target (as in archery) so this is what God's mercy and grace in Christ comes to deal with in us.

In Luke 18, the blind man, calls out, "Jesus Son of David have mercy on me!" Ah, here is a man invoking the terms of the covenant! One is to love one's neighbour as [one like]¹² oneself and this blind man was not going to be put off by others telling him to be quiet when he believed Jesus could heal him.

All these people seeking Jesus' (God's) mercy stand afar off because of their sickness or occupational status. In Jesus, God has visited us with salvation (health and wholeness) promised in his covenantal word to Abram at the beginning (in you, shall all the nations of the world be blessed).

4. Why so important?

If mercy is the quality of God that is much featured in the liturgy, the observation raises the important question of why is it that we need mercy. Are we also in the position of the blind? lepers? Why do we need God's mercy in Christ?

As those who have been initiated into a covenant of mercy by virtue of baptism, we are aware that we stand in need of God's mercy because we are sinners before God; we have broken the law of God (offenders) and are subject to judgement and condemnation. But in the economy of God, judgement¹³ and mercy always go together. Mercy is strongly evident when a judgement has been given made against

¹² An alternate and I think better translation. We are never exhorted in the scriptures to love ourselves. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/loving1.html>

¹³ Judgement is designed to lead to correction and the application of mercy and grace.

some offence as was the case of the children of Israel who decided to speak against God and Moses to the point where God sent fiery serpents, which bit them so that they died (judgement: Numbers 21:5-9). However, when some of the people repented God instructed Moses to set up a serpent on a pole so that any bitten who would look would live (mercy). This OT story is referred to in John 3 where the death of Jesus Christ is likened to the lifting up of that serpent on the pole (v. 14); and by parallel, the misery of those looking at the upraised serpent is likened to our looking to Christ in faith to receive eternal life (Jn 3:16).

St Paul summing up the experience and state of all the redeemed says to the Ephesians:

For it is by grace [at times a synonym for mercy] that you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast. For we are his workman created in Christ Jesus for good works (2:8-10a).

He also says to Titus:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.

But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (3: 3-7).

5. Just as God is merciful, so are we to be

He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of thee but to do justice and to love mercy (chesed) and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:8). Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Luke 6: 36).

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) well illustrates the role of mercy.

Mercy is directed by the merciful (the Good Samaritan) towards those who are **miserable** (the victim left naked by thieves). The lawyer (Luke 10.29) asked Jesus, “who is my neighbour?” However, Jesus told him a parable which answered the question, “and what does a good neighbour do?” Perhaps Jesus realised that this lawyer wanted an argument rather than be faced with the challenge to “love mercy”.

6. Discussion

At the beginning of this paper, I presented a number of other aspects of God revealed. If you were to select one of these to characterise Anglicanism which would it be and can you justify this choice from your knowledge of the Prayer Book?

Is there another representation of God in Christ that you would rather work with or do you find the mercy of God an accurate representation of the work of God towards us as per the Prayer Book? Why or why not?