

An Optimistic Vision of Divine Justice

Matthew the poor

Introduction

- What is the Christian's vision of the justice with which God rules the world?
- Do pain, disease, death, wars, earthquakes and other natural disasters conflict with the mercy of God?
- Should we see the actions of God as signs of His anger or vengeance?
- How does the mercy of God apply to those who undergo pain and death, and to those who are thus orphaned?
- How can one detach oneself from painful reality?
- Grieving over what one lacks and desiring more of what one has and the consequent schism in man.
- A vision of immortality beyond suffering.

A correction of our understanding of mercy

We often confuse mercy as people see it with the mercy of God, because God's dealings with men seem to us to be His attributes, while they are in fact a method adapted to our changing nature, which is prone to regress and progress.

The mercy which people attribute to God has come to be measured in their minds on the basis of their sense of mercy as they would perceive it in the relations between one man and another. This human way of evaluation is so weak and limited as to be quite incorrect and inappropriate to comprehend the special mercy of God. We are obliged initially to use this measure to gain a general sense of mercy, for it is the only method admissible to the perception of the ordinary man, but if we wish to understand God's special wisdom in acting mercifully, we must rise above this sensory perception to a mental understanding, so that we may perceive the supreme and limitless mercy of God.

We cannot comprehend the infinite with our finite minds, nor expect to understand it in the same way as we would measure the size of material objects. Our minds can only help by leading us off the path of the sensory, and of material evaluations, to the fringe of the world of matter, and leaving us to encounter the infinite, and sense in our spiritual being the truth that lies beyond actuality.

We see that human mercy conflicts with murder and this contributes to the forming of a limited picture of mercy in our minds. But we also know that society may condemn a criminal to death, and nobody objects that this conflicts with our sense of mercy. So the first boundary that we set for mercy is overstepped, and mercy extends in another direction governed not by the material senses but by logical mental standards. Now if man can allow that killing need not conflict with

mercy, how broad must be our conception of God's mercy in His dealings with us, for His mercy is beyond the standards even of logic and mind.

We also know that it is an act of great mercy for a man to hasten the death of a sick or wounded animal that is in great pain and bound to die. Now if human mercy permits the killing of an animal without offending against man's finer feelings, it is clear that mental and logical understanding is higher than physical and sensory perceptions, so how can we refuse to accept that God deals mercifully with us and the creation by relying on the limited circle of our physical senses? In addition, if mercy, as man evaluates it, may extend to include actions which are not in themselves merciful, and may even appear to contradict mercy, we should, when we speak of the mercy of God and consider its aims, not stop short at the point where it conflicts with our sensory or mental perceptions, as if the mercy of God were in error or had strayed off the mysterious path of logic, making us uneasy.

We should not carelessly disregard events, for this is bound to lead us to kill our feelings and emotions; nor should we attribute these apparent conflicts to fate, or arbitrarily explain them away as mysterious acts of God's mercy without understanding what this means for our own being, for this attitude is bound to lead us to develop an obscure concept of God, easily confused and disturbed. What we should do is to alert our inner sense in every way, so that we understand and perceive the mercy of God in all that happens around us, regardless of how great a conflict there may be with sensory perceptions or human logic.

In human thought, it is common for pain, disease, death, wars, earthquakes and other natural disasters, to be taken to contradict the mercy of God, or at least not to be in harmony with it. The image of divine mercy then vanishes from man's mind and he sees the works of God as signs of His anger or vengeance. But if we understand the matter with our spirit and inner being we find no conflict with mercy in any event that takes place under the sun.

If we consider death, the end result of pain, in its innumerable varied forms, coming as it may after sudden or prolonged illness, as a result of accidents, wars, earthquakes or famines, we see that the direct effect of death is on two parties, he who undergoes pain and death and those who are deprived of the care of the deceased.

Now he who undergoes death does not consider it an alien event, for death must of necessity enter into his life. And so its hour comes and it is no matter for amazement. On the contrary the whole of his past life contains less earnest truth than this moment. However violent his death may be or however painful, is of no importance to the dying man himself, but his suffering and the horror of it remain fixed in the minds of those who visited him while he was on his death bed. And so death has become fearsome to the living, even though it is in fact not very different from the state of a sick and suffering man whose pain is suddenly ended by the use of anesthetic. So if disease does not terrify us, death should do so even less. If we consider in detail what death means to the dying, we discover that death should be counted a mercy, especially if it comes after suffering.

As for those who are deprived of the care of their provider by his death, the mercy of God intervenes on their behalf clearly and conspicuously. God appoints Himself a father to them in

every sense of the word, showing for them a father's compassion, solicitude and care. He also burdens Himself with another duty beyond that of fatherhood, and becomes their protector: "Father of the fatherless, protector of the widows" (Ps 68:5). "Leave your fatherless children, I will keep them alive; and let your widows trust in me" (Jer 49:11). How full are these words of meaning and profound mystery, and even of experience and tested fact! For even if these deprived ones have to struggle harder to provide for their needs, they surely do so under God's special care and direct protection.

So it appears that they enjoy a greater portion of mercy because of the death of their provider!

If death appears to us to be a stark and painful event implying God's neglect and abandonment, it is because of our failure to explore the matter deeply. At its heart lies a quite contrary truth, which is that God Himself bears responsibility for the family left behind. In short, God who brings death and grants life, has Himself guaranteed that He will never withhold His mercy from any man who seeks it, and has bound Himself to supply our physical and spiritual needs, even if we lose our sole provider.

How many outstanding men in the world have lost their father as children! This very deprivation became an incentive to develop their intellect and perceptions and they have risen to brilliance in every science and art. This is a form of divine compensation; it appears to be a natural development, but it is in fact a divinely worked order. And even if an orphan does not attain even a mediocre standard in life as a direct result of the loss of his father, we cannot blame God indiscriminately, for He has given the human race feelings of compassion and tenderness towards the needy, as well as a special commendation to care for orphans and widows, which constitutes a great store of caring for these poor people. So it is that even if death brings, on the one hand, deprivation to those who lose their provider, it also has a beneficial aspect in that it stirs up the human instincts of compassion and love to put into practice the mercy poured into our hearts by the Spirit of God for the needy, and thus to complete the body of humanity.

Thus God does not cease to have mercy and to declare His fatherly compassion, in all possible ways, according to the scheme of creation and the order of its laws, which are wise, effective, appropriate and receptive to all goodness. Whoever has eyes to see can perceive the great richness with which God has endued human nature; and individual lack or negative circumstance is met with great compensatory reserves in human nature and in the creation in general. What we need to do is first to recognize our gifts and then to strengthen, coordinate and use them to satisfy human needs whether on the individual, communal, national or worldwide level.

A correction of our understanding of arbitrary suffering

Our sense of pain is an important part of the extensive realm of the human senses by which man lives in this wondrous and amazing universe.

There is no dividing line between the senses and the body and the senses of the soul. Rather they are harmoniously blended in such a way as to enable us to participate meaningfully in the world

around us, which is itself a blend of matter and spirit. Our bodies walk on the earth as part of it, participating with it in all its gifts and obligations, subject to all the laws of the cosmic world that apply to matter, laws of attraction, movement, heat, pressure, change. For our bodies are in fact a handful of the dust of the earth, upon which they move by virtue of the power of the living soul that is united to them. Our bodies do not sense the material world and its laws through our mental perception alone, but through the harmony of necessity that exists between them and it, for all are of one material nature.

The human spirit also constitutes an important part of the living spiritual realm, which it senses mysteriously but powerfully through its awareness of itself. Its sense of its own being and existence is a real participation in existence as a whole.

For as long as we are living in the body we shall be unable to divide between the feelings of the body and the feelings of the soul regarding existence in general. The harmony between body and soul in human life has been made strong so that man can live at one with the cosmic spiritual world without his natural disposition being separated from his self. This harmony between the physical and spiritual senses in the nature of man is what makes him a creation distinct from other created things. He is neither pure animal of dull perception, lacking in emotion, limited in feelings, in fact simply a living body, nor is he pure spirit having lofty perceptions and unrestrained feelings in the power of an unrestricted spirit. No! He is an amazing blend of animal insensitivity and exalted spiritual perceptions. He is capable of all extremes of feeling, from the basest in the flesh to the highest in the spirit. This unique combination makes man distinct in his lofty sensibilities, which grow still more elevated as he rises spiritually, extending in their effect from the basic animal instincts to what is even beyond nature. There is nothing in any other creation that can compare to this.

This harmony between spiritual and physical feelings is no random affair. A clear purpose lies behind it. Man is called to rise up, together with his natural physical instincts and senses, to the level of spirituality that will make him able to maintain the level of human nature above that of the animal. He is not required to rise beyond his bodily senses to become like the angels, nor is he permitted to sink to the level of animal feelings, rejecting his spiritual potentialities. The direct result of this wondrous harmony between the physical and spiritual senses is man's ability, on the one hand, to direct physical senses to great spiritual heights, which we call sublimation, and on the other, to control spiritual insights and introduce them into the realm of the visible, physical world, which we call righteousness, virtue and high moral behavior. It is for this purpose that almighty God gave man a nervous system so accurate that we can find nothing so sensitive or specialized in any other system, either in man himself or in any other creature, so that man should be able to rise, with his physical senses to the furthest possible limits, and make contact with the unknown area of the higher senses of the soul. At the same time he remains able to perceive the high senses of the soul and spiritual insights, and then subject them to his mind by forming them into the spoken word or artistic works or spiritual actions.

So we see that the superb sensitivity of human feelings and senses serves the spiritual interest of man. Indeed they exist to provide an opportunity for man's spiritual development. If man were created a simple animal he would be in no need of such extremely sensitive feelings, and especially of his ability to experience thousands of different forms of suffering. Some of these do

not serve to support his physical or animal life, but on the contrary diminish his happiness, and sometimes have a severely debilitating or even fatal effect. Such is the case with complex psychological suffering. If then we try to understand the many sufferings that man undergoes from a co-existential point of view, that is within the limits set by the necessities of man's physical life alone, we shall find no explanation for many kinds of suffering, nor shall we even be able to establish a law governing their occurrence.

But if we think again and introduce some idea of the importance of the role of suffering for man from a spiritual point of view, then we find an explanation for all suffering. Indeed, if we try as hard as the importance of the subject warrants, we shall even be able to discover a law regulating man's relationship to suffering. We may look to the Apostle's words: "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22), or to the words of the Apostle James, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials" (Jas 1:2), or Paul "When I am weak, then am I strong" (2Cor 12:10), "Be patient in tribulation" (Rom 12:12), or the Apostle Peter, "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1Pet 4:14), "If when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval" (1Pet 2:20).

But not all people use their fine senses and excellent nervous system for the heavenly purpose for which they were created, that is for an exalted virtuous human life with high human and spiritual aims. There are many who are content to allow their senses and emotions and mental powers simply to interact with concerns of the body, the world and material affairs. We thus find, on the one hand, that the former have always been able to absorb the painful shocks of life and benefit from them. They are skilful at transforming transient suffering into useful psychological and spiritual experiences. It is as if suffering has become their faithful friend, or the language of reality from which they could draw heavenly, spiritual lessons. This is the emotional and psychological attitude that is fitting for man. On the other hand, we find that the latter fail to benefit from life's blows and grumble over their passing sufferings and even over the sufferings of others. It is as if suffering has become their bitter enemy, making them more and more pessimistic, and bringing down all that is lofty in them to the lowest possible level of interaction with daily life, till they lead an almost animal existence limited to purely bodily actions.

Detachment from painful reality

The "reality" we mean here is the narrow, tangible, material reality or the pessimistic attitude of mind that occurs when reality seems to offer man no way out: a chronic disease, failure, injustice, persecution, or any of the chain of disasters which may shatter the lives of those with high ambitions. If a man is caught in the struggle with these, he may be swept away by a flood of anxiety and bitterness. The infinite joy of life escapes him and he loses the boundless hope which life offers, the hope that rises and towers above every material disaster and every pessimistic expectation, the sweetest and finest of all man can drink in of the nectar of existence.

God granted man an immortal energy within his original nature, so that he should remain victorious over death, even if his body was defeated, and man will continue to catch glimpses of

the glories of this immortality even in the humiliation of subjugation. And in the end his face will be smiling in victory over the world against a background of the tears of painful reality.

If man is conscious of the greatness of his immortality and lives in close accord with the stirrings of his spirit, which are instigated by the breath of God, he will perceive that he has been mysteriously prepared to fly on the wings of his spirit over the valley of death with its wails and specters, fearing no evil, like a bird created to soar to the pinnacles of light, not to make its home in the bog of deceitful reality. Man is greater than time and therefore greater than all the events woven by time, whose true destiny is to be forgotten and then fall into oblivion.

Therefore the greatest danger man faces in this world is to lose his vision of immortality, and thus lose his sense of equilibrium on the path of life. He then falls into the whirlpool of narrow material reality, which is created by this age. He begins to evaluate himself according to what fortune has brought him and what he has failed to grasp. He measures what he has in comparison with what others have. His soul is contorted by the bitterness of this mental evaluation, his spirit becomes confined and all his talents restricted. In this view there is no longer any equality between the degrees of happiness and honor allotted to man, although all this is of dust and must return to dust. He shrinks within himself until he is reduced to nothingness.

It is not only those whom fortune deprives of happiness and honor who fall into the trap of complaining over the painful reality that is limited to time and place. There are also those whose aim is heedlessly to fulfill their own wishes and satisfy their desires for external pleasures and the honor and glory of this age. They are enflamed by an ambition to acquire more and more without ever being satisfied, nor will they ever be, for every aim they achieve subjugates them to another without their ever being content. Such as these are slaves to the desire for more. This is the tight trap which holds them fast and mercilessly in time and place, and makes the minutes of each hour and their luxurious offices a cramped depressing prison.

Strangely enough those who consider themselves deprived of the basic factors necessary for temporal happiness find themselves in the same situation as those who have acquired it through excessive ambition without attaining contentment or satisfaction. Both types become entangled in the round of material reality which is bound to time and place so strongly that it amounts to idolization and loss of being itself. One is drawn into the trap by his overwhelming sense of deprivation and injustice, and the other is drawn into the same trap by his insane insatiable desire for more. Thus is the world able by material deception to entice man, that is man's soul, into falling under the subjugation of the closed circle of time and place. He is robbed of the freedom of his existence and his ability to extend his being beyond time and place equally by both excessive deprivation and an excessive share in illusory happiness.

How then does liberation take place?

Blissful eternity, which is completely boundless, and immortality with its limitlessness and endless hope, is within man and not outside of him. "The kingdom of God is within you" (Lk

17:21). The great trick of the world is to deceive man into looking for happiness outside himself and calling on God as if He were far from his own heart.

We may therefore say briefly that feelings of bitterness at deprivation of the basic components necessary for an illusory happiness and the kind of honor that is based on outward appearances, are in fact a true reflection of, or a clear reaction to the great loss man suffered when he made the grave mistake of turning his back on the elements necessary for inner happiness, with its eternal depth and hope and endless riches. That is to say the bitterness that results from a sense of deprivation is in fact a direct penalty which continually pursues man unaware, not because of a spurious deprivation, but because of his loss of the true vision of true happiness. To clarify the balance between the two we may say that this measure of oppressive and true feeling of bitterness at the sense of deprivation that pursues a man so relentlessly, making his life a misery and robbing him of his sense of equilibrium and his very being, can absolutely not be equated with a spurious loss of that spurious temporal happiness or false outward honor. The oppressive feeling of resentment is a sense that springs from the loss of something true and deprivation of a real not illusory happiness, that is the lasting happiness of the inner man, whose hope and joy extend into the depths of the eternal relationship with God.

This means that as soon as man feels within him a sense that he is deprived of the outwards forms of happiness and the honor of this world, and the bitterness of his resentment grows oppressive, it is a serious warning that he has begun to be separated from the depths of his being and to leave his inner greatness, his riches, his immortality and the causes for his joy and his eternal hope. He has set about bewailing his ill fortune and measuring his stature by looking at the trifles of worldly glory and passing show which others trample underfoot.

As for the man who has become enslaved to the desire for excess and exaltation, he is driven by insatiable longing from height to height, eager, energetic and filled with unquenchable ambition. The deception that motivates him to seek for more may be the very thing that sets him on the road to liberation. For with a little reflection he may be able to perceive that the desire for more has no limit which, if he attains it will bring contentment or satisfaction with reality, however much he tries to convince himself or control his ambitions. Why? Because the passionate desire for more is essentially a gift implanted deeply in human nature to go hand in hand with man's progress in eternal things, that cannot be confined within the temporal. An endless, insatiable, passionate desire for more truly befits man's approach to the divine. Therefore, whenever man links his instinctive, passionate desire for more with its true aim, that is with the things of God, the great deception comes to an end. Man suddenly stops his breathless running in the circle of empty ambitions for temporal things, and begins from the depths of his being to make his way towards God and eternity, with a contentment about his material affairs which increases his success.