

"Mercy, Not Sacrifice"

Homily of June 9, 2002

by Father Brian Timoney

"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." This quotation from Hosea seems to a favored one with Jesus because He used it more than once. Now a few lines earlier than this quotation, Hosea had said, "Your piety is like the morning cloud, like the dew that passes very early." I think Jesus would have applied this to the Pharisees; their piety was very shallow.

Now they were good people, indeed, they were pious people. But they seemed to have gotten under the skin of Jesus. Why? Well, I think it was because they had such a high and mighty opinion of themselves. They were so, so very self-righteous. They were scrupulous about observing every last minute detail of the law, but would have nothing to do with anyone who did not live up to their extremely high standards. So, they were fundamentally selfish, more concerned with their own view of God's law than with helping anyone else to live up to it. They were more concerned with criticism than with encouragement. They practically gloated over what they judged to be the shortcomings of other people. Their first instinct was to condemn the sinner, not to help the fallen rise again. You might say that forgiveness was an unknown virtue to them. They practiced a religion that was long on personal devotions, but very short on practical help to those who fell short of their high demands.

Well, that was 2000 years ago, but if you think that this view of religion is long past then I would invite you to open up the letter page of our Catholic newspaper - you will find it there. The answer that Jesus gave to that attitude (that false piety) was the wonderful statement, "People in good health do not need a physician, sick people do. It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice. I've come to call not the self-righteous, but sinners." And if those words do not resonate with us, then I think our spiritual sickness is really at a critical point. So let us be open to these words of Jesus.

There's a bit of that self-righteousness that is in us - perhaps lurking just below the surface- (?) that we're far from perfect. That we need the healing ministry of Jesus in our own life, and that we are called to extend that healing ministry to others. Judge not, and you shall not be judged, Scripture says. We must not sit in judgment of the sinner. We can certainly name the fault, we can call a person to change his or her way of life, we do not condone wrong-doing, but it is for us to try to bring the healing power of Christ to those who really need it, to bring forgiveness into other people's lives. "I have come to call sinners." Forgiveness is an absolutely fundamental element of Christianity. "It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice," Jesus said. Yes, even sacred liturgy, the sacrifice, is not more important than mercy. And that is why in another place, Jesus said, "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that someone has something against

you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, and go and be reconciled to that person; then in coming you can offer your gift." What a powerful imperative for us - no amount of piety, no number of prayers, no offering (even of the Mass!), can take the place of mercy and forgiveness.

Well, as we all know from our own personal experience, forgiveness is something that is very, very difficult indeed for us to do. Yet just last month, I was in Ireland visiting with my family and I heard a story that I think was an extraordinary story of forgiveness. My young grand-nephew (my niece's little boy), he's almost five. Well, he climbed up on the hood of the neighbor's car, and dented it. Naturally his older brother spilled the beans! His mother sat him down and explained the nature of his crime, and told him that he had to go down and admit and apologize to these people (who were an older couple). So he went down and he said that he had done this, and that he was very, very sorry. And then as he turned away to leave, he turned back and said, "If there's anything I can ever do for you, let me know! I'm very good with animals!" (Laughter.) Well, they were so taken by all of this that they gave him a box of chocolates! (Laughter!) When he brought the box of chocolates home, his mother said, "No way! No way! You cannot take these; you have to bring those back! You cannot profit from your crime!" So he brought them back and he said that his mom said to tell them that it was very, very nice of them to give him the box of chocolates but he could not profit from his crime. So they said, "Well, come on in and we'll eat them here!" (Laughter!) Now, if that is not forgiveness, please tell me what is! I think it is an extraordinary example.

We do find it hard, don't we? We find it very, very hard to forgive. I think forgiveness presupposes in us a real conviction that we ourselves are far from perfect. That we too are sinners, that we are wounded healers. "I've come," Jesus said, "to call not the self-righteous, but sinners."

Well, I think we can only give thanks today that our God is a God of mercy and compassion. That Jesus has declared Himself to be our spiritual physician, truly interested in our spiritual well being, and that no spiritual sickness is beyond His healing power. So let us accept that healing for us, and let us be enablers of that healing power in our world today. Amen.