

failure, but if we look at the life of the one perfect, righteous man, the man who said, “*Learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart,*” we will see a man who in the eyes of the world failed completely. Jesus in his life judged with just judgement and with mercy and yet ended his life on a cross. But it was his total obedience to the will of his Father that ensured that his death was not the end of the story. The paradox of justice and mercy was resolved there on the cross by the sacrifice of himself, and his resurrection was the inevitable outcome of his loving obedience. If we in union with Christ can have the faith and courage to pursue our quest for justice and mercy we can be assured that our past mistakes will be repaired and our sins forgiven. Our seeming failures, God can turn into triumphs, provided that we do not try to usurp his prerogatives, provided that we always treat with him as God.



He hath shewn thee, O Man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. Micah 6: 8.

Simple isn't it! If all people were to take that exhortation to heart and do it, there would be paradise on earth. But of course the reality is very different. We may pay lip service to the idea of justice, mercy and humility, but living them out in practice involves tension and struggle.

We are well aware that injustice is rife in the world, leaving in its wake untold bitterness, suffering and misery that festers and breeds, handing on its legacy of violence and alienation to the next generation. Justice is pictured sometimes as a blindfolded figure holding a pair of scales; it is impartial, does not favour one side or the other, gives to each what is his or her due. How do we “do justly”?

In the Bible the word translated “Justice” can also be translated “Righteousness”. This brings an added dimension with its suggestion of being in the right relationship with God. The righteous man is what he is supposed to be; all things are done at the right time and in the right measure. To seek righteousness is parallel with seeking God, for God himself is our righteousness and it is only in union with him that we can be said to have any righteousness of our own. God shows his righteousness and justice in effecting deliverance and vindicating his people. This saving attribute is combined with love, faithfulness, judgement with power, blessing and healing. This widens the scope of our “doing justly” which is then not confined to narrow legalistic ideas of justice.

Righteousness embodies the idea of mercy. Giving each person his or her due means taking into account all the circumstances and therefore exercising compassion towards one another. As we know we are in need of mercy ourselves, so we must show it to others, and what is more, we are to *love* mercy, be wanting to find every excuse to show it.

There is all the same a tension between justice and mercy. Justice demands strict deserts, mercy demands leniency. The trouble is that mercy shown to one may involve injustice to another. At the beginning of the film "The Godfather" there is a scene where a man whose daughter has been beaten up by a gang of youths goes to the Mafia "Godfather". At the trial the young men were let off with a fine as it was a first offence and they came from privileged backgrounds. The girl's father made the comment, "The young men received justice; my daughter didn't." Probably we have all experienced situations where by showing mercy or acting justly towards one party means that we have done an injustice towards another.

We have to face the fact that life itself is not just. Some people are born with every advantage, others have more than their fair share of misfortunes. The sun shines and the rain falls on both the just and the unjust. We work individually or through governments to redress the balance, to try and ensure that people are treated fairly, but the goal always eludes us. As Jesus said "You have the poor with you always." No matter what laws are passed, what acts of charity we do, there is always inequality and injustice.

Are we then to abandon all efforts, do nothing because the ideal is unobtainable? Is there any way of reconciling the demands of both justice and mercy? Is it possible for us to be righteous and not sin?

God is said to have spoken in a vision to a nun in the last century:

*"The door of my Mercy is never locked . . . In one moment I can repair all the past of a soul, provided that soul **treats with me as God.**"*
Sister Begnina Consolata Ferrara.

Yes, there lies the answer - Walk humbly, with your God. We have

to remember that *He* is God; we are only his creatures. The primordial sin is that of wanting to be God ourselves, to be in total control of our own lives, so God has, so to speak, built in to the world paradoxes which are untidy, situations which cannot be resolved. Whenever we try to manipulate and order events to what we think good some unforeseen element rises up and demolishes all our achievement. Our very best efforts to be just and merciful end in confusion and it seems sometimes that we achieve very little.

This dilemma was worked out in the life of a German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, during the last World War. To begin with he was a pacifist, but eventually he came to the conclusion that if a madman had gone berserk while driving a car, it was a citizen's duty to try and stop him. He therefore entered a plot to assassinate Hitler, which misfired. He was arrested and eventually executed. At one point he wrote:

"We are called to the responsibility of Christian adulthood that depends on God who demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the man who becomes a sinner in that venture."

Here perhaps we can get an inkling of how we can act with justice and mercy:- by walking humbly with God. God ***demand**s* responsible action. The welfare of other people and nations ***is*** our concern, but we must remember that we are not God. It has been said that we ought to pray as if it were all up to God and to act as if it were all up to ourselves. There must be complete trust and dependence upon God, knowing that even if our motives for action are dubious and our logic unreliable, in the end it does not matter. ". . . *We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us . . . We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.*" *Romans 8*. God can turn even our sinful and evil doings into good. On our own we can do nothing. God does not impose his will by force; that would be taking away our free will but God working through us can achieve his purpose. In prayer we must try and discern God's will and then do it with all our heart and soul. We will make mistakes, but as it has been said, the person who never makes a mistake never makes anything. We are called to work with God, doing the best we can but leaving the outcome to him. Sometimes we will be faced with