Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy:  
Reading the Scriptures   
through the Jubilee Year of Mercy

An exchange with

Rev. Sean Charles Martin, President

Aquinas Institute of Theology

Jesus and Mercy

February 28, 2016

Jesus and the Gospels

* The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus
* The Gospels do preserve memories of the ministry of Jesus
* The Gospels are the earliest examples of narrative Christology
  + Christology is a sustained reflection on the person and the mission of Jesus
  + These Christologies are put in the form of a narrative

A literary preface

* Jesus knew the sacred literature of his own people
* In the Hebrew Scriptures,חֶ֫סֶד (*hesed*) both describes God, and describes what God requires of his people
* In Hebrew, חֶ֫סֶד(*hesed*) has a wide semantic range
  + Loyalty
  + Kindness
  + Mercy

A linguistic Preface

* Jesus undoubtedly spoke in Aramaic
* It is likely that he knew Hebrew
* It is possible that he knew Greek
* The sayings of Jesus are preserved only in Greek
* חֶסֶד (*hesed*) was typically rendered in the Greek of the Septuagint by ελεος (*eleos*)
* The Gospels use various forms of ελεος to describe the mercy of God, or acts of mercy by Jesus

The sayings of Jesus on Mercy

* “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7)
* “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13; 12:7)

Matthew 5:7

* The fifth of nine macarisms which open the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1 – 7:29)
* Note the use of a (quasi-) divine passive
  + A way of identifying divine activity without naming God
* Virtue as mimetic
  + See Matthew 5:48
  + See Leviticus 19:2

Matthew 9:13

* This is a pronouncement story
  + A brief narrative, the purpose of which is to provide a context within which a memorable saying of Jesus can be remembered and interpreted
* The narrative preserves the memory of Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners
* The memorable saying is Matthew 9:12, 13B
  + Compare to Mark 2:17
* Here Matthew interposes the quotation from Hosea 6:6

Matthew 12:1-8

* Another pronouncement story
* Here the narrative preserves the memory of Jesus’ attitude toward the Law
* Compare to Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5
* Here again, Matthew interposes the reference to Hosea 6:6

Why the references to Hosea 6:6?

* Matthew’s Gospel was written for believers who were deeply immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures
* Like the fulfillment citations (see Mt. 1:22; 2:15B; 2:23B; 4:14-16, etc.), the references to Hosea 6:6 allow the original believers to understand Jesus within a set of authoritative categories
* In Mt 9:13 and 12:7, the point seems to be that acts of mercy are ways by which one can enter into communion with God

The merciful deeds of Jesus

* The merciful deeds of Jesus are frequently acts of thaumaturgy
* As such, they are manifestations of the power of God
* They are frequently occasioned by the request ἐλέησόν με (*eleēson me*) “Have mercy on me”

Acts of thaumaturgy   
in the Gospels

* Someone is in extreme difficulty
* Jesus says something or does something which eliminates the difficulty
* There is a demonstration of the efficacy of the act of thaumaturgy
* The bystanders react as a kind of choric response

The healing of the Canaanite woman’s daughter  
(Matthew 15:21-28)

* The woman is an outsider
* The disciples wish to send her away
* Literary pattern
  + initial request
  + initial rebuff
  + repeated request
  + eventual compliance
* The interchange between Jesus and the woman shows the sharp wits of both
* The healing takes place at a distance
* Mercy is available, even to outsiders

The Healing of Bar Timaeus  
(Mark 10:46-52)

* Someone tries to impede access to Jesus
* Bar-Timaeus is persistent, repeating “Have mercy on me” twice (vv. 47B, 48B)
* The thaumaturgical act is brief here (vv. 51-52A)
* Note the unusual choric response (vv. 52B)
* The reception of mercy as the occasion for discipleship

Cleansing ten lepers   
(Luke 17:11–19)

* Leprosy as a “feared disease”
* Jesus and lepers
* The other nine do as they’re told (v. 14)
* The Samaritan engages in “holy disobedience” (v. 15)
* What does this tell us about the Kingdom of God?

© Seán Charles Martin. All rights reserved. Not to be reproduced or redistributed without the explicit permission of the copyright holder.