

## Mercy and Theology- Mark Kiley

I will employ these subdivisions in the field to organize my remarks about Walter Kasper's book *MERCY*: Scripture, history, doctrine, systematics, and practical theology.

**Scripture:** Walter Kasper is certainly right to situate divine mercy in the context of Exodus 32-34. Those chapters depict the moment when Israel has broken faith with their Liberator, a moment within which they are invited to begin again in covenant relationship, with the Lord and each other. In Luke's Gospel, *Mary's Magnificat* hymn of praise combines the theme of the Liberator's powerful, world-altering Name with mention of God's mercy. Moreover, several Hebrew terms that come to be emblematic of mercy are given narrative expression elsewhere in Luke's infancy narrative. *ḥanan* is one such term. It lies behind the name Hannah who in turn informs the portrait of Elizabeth in Luke 1. *Rahmim* refers to the womb and is embodied in the stories of the elderly Elizabeth and the young virgin Mary. And *ḥesed* is given narrative expression in the young Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem at Passover, the feast of God's once and ongoing offer of mercy to Israel. In short, the tapestry of Luke's infancy narratives is woven with mercy's thread. I would go further in this Lukan trajectory of mercy by suggesting that we may fruitfully read *Mary's Magnificat* in light of the first half of Matthew's Beatitudes. And the prayer of Zechariah, also in Luke 1, may productively be read in light of the Matthean Beatitudes' latter half. Within that matrix, Mary associates mercy with God's remembrance of the covenant and Zechariah celebrates God's mercy in the dawn from on high that breaks upon us, with the announcement of salvation and guidance in the way of peace. And I would suggest that Matthew's centrally located beatitude of mercy instigates the special attention to mercy in Matt 9:27-31, 35-38 in the middle of chapters 8-10, chapters that instantiate the vision of the beatitudes. In John, Jesus' repeated emphasis on the themes of light and judgment, no matter what his interlocutors ask, instantiates "My thoughts are not your thoughts" in Isaiah. This undergirds the Lord's sovereign exercise of a mercy (though he does not use the word) that is not simply a second-stage reaction to human misery. And John's

exploration of Ps. 41 allows us to see Judas as the Beloved Disciple. This dovetails with the fact that nowhere in John's glorification narratives does Jesus appear to the *Eleven* disciples.

**History:** The expression of mercy is not limited to members of the covenant people in Israel or the church. Cyrus the Persian was renowned in the ancient world for his enlightened policies regarding captured peoples. In the early history of the church, Augustine correlated the gifts of the Spirit (as listed in Isaiah 11:2) with the beatitudes. He explored the gift of counsel in light of mercy. He explores ways in which the surd of sin truncates that counsel because of our inadequate appreciation of our need for mercy, and on the flip side, our too timid desire for such mercy. The medieval church gave us the seven spiritual and corporal works of mercy, of which Cardinal Kasper makes mention.

**Doctrine:** The Cardinal also knows that the Chair of Peter has addressed the topic of divine mercy in human life. *Dives in Misericordia* is wholly given over to the topic with special attention to the social implications of mercy at work in the world. In it, John Paul II reminds us of the inadequacy and horror of justice that is not tempered by mercy, as epitomized in the saying *summum ius, summon iniuria*, greatest justice, greatest injury. And *Deus Caritas Est* (Benedict XVI) is an extended exploration of mercy in various venues.

**Systematics:** Exactly 70 years ago this year, the Dominican Gerald Vann took Augustine's program one step further and correlated each of the Beatitudes with a sacrament of the church (*The Divine Pity*). He explored mercy in relation to the anointing of the sick, particularly as the last rite. There he noted that this sacrament reminds us of our hope that what we have loved in this life is to be completed in the fullness of God's life, and that such sacramental assistance helps us to exercise the gift of perseverance in the present.

**Practical Theology:** Pope Francis has recently asked us to think of care for the earth as an act of mercy on a par with the traditional list of the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy.