

Msgr. Bill's Weekly Letter...

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

St. John Paul II penned the encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia, Rich in Mercy*, on 30 November 1980. He begins with, *It is "God, who is rich in mercy" ¹ whom Jesus Christ has revealed to us as Father: it is His very Son who, in Himself, has manifested Him and made Him known to us.*

I encourage all to take some time reading this encyclical. As with many of his writings there are some difficult sections, but it is well worth the effort. The following is an excerpt from a footnote about the origin of the words for mercy. Often the footnotes are citations of where to find a source. Other times they explain something. This is one of them.

In describing mercy, the books of the Old Testament use two expressions in particular, each having a different semantic nuance.

First there is the term *hesed*, which indicates a profound attitude of "goodness." When this is established between two individuals, they do not just wish each other well; they are also faithful to each other by virtue of an interior commitment, and therefore also by virtue of a faithfulness to themselves. Since *hesed* also means "grace" or "love," this occurs precisely on the basis of this fidelity. ... This covenant was, on God's part, a gift and a grace for Israel. The juridical commitment on God's part ceased to oblige whenever Israel broke the covenant and did not respect its conditions. But precisely at this point, *hesed*, in ceasing to be a juridical obligation, revealed its deeper aspect: it showed itself as what it was at the beginning, that is, as love that gives, love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin. ... Therefore, Israel, although burdened with guilt for having broken the covenant, cannot lay claim to God's *hesed* on the basis of (legal) justice; yet it can and must go on hoping and trusting to obtain it, since the God of the covenant is really "responsible for his life."

... The second word which in the terminology of the Old Testament serves to define mercy is *rahamim*. This has a different nuance from that of *hesed*. While *hesed* highlights the marks of fidelity to self and of "responsibility for one's own love" (which are in 31 a certain sense masculine characteristics), *rahamim*, in its very root, denotes the love of a mother (*reheem* - mother's womb).

From the deep and original bond - indeed the unity - that links a mother to her child there springs a particular relationship to the child, a particular love. Of this love one can say that it is completely gratuitous, not merited, and that in this aspect it constitutes an interior necessity: an exigency of the heart. It is, as it were, a "feminine" variation of the masculine fidelity to self-expressed by *hesed*. Against this psychological background, *rahamim* generates a whole range of feelings, including **goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding, that is, readiness to forgive.**

The Old Testament attributes to the Lord precisely these characteristics, when it uses the term *rahamim* in speaking of Him. We read in Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is 49:15). This love, faithful and invincible thanks to the mysterious power of motherhood, is expressed in the Old Testament texts in various ways: as salvation from dangers, especially from enemies; also as forgiveness of sins - of individuals and also of the whole of Israel; and finally in readiness to fulfill the (eschatological) promise and hope, in spite of human infidelity, as we read in Hosea: "I will heal their faithlessness, I will love them freely" (Hos 14:5).

That's about one third of the footnote. We are blessed by God that he sends us authors who illumine our faith in order that we can continue growing in our faith. God indeed is a God of mercy.

pace - bene,

Msgr. Bill

