

*O God, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity*

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The themes for the last two Sundays, as reflected in the Collects and lessons have been themes of humility and submitting ourselves to God's Will. We have been reminded of God's *never-failing providence which orders all things*, and that *we cannot do any thing good without [Him]*. This week the themes progress to God's mercy and pity. We acknowledge that God orders all things, and that we cannot do any thing good without Him, and this requires God to have mercy and pity on us. But this morning's Collect presents us with a startling truth, *O God, who declares thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity*. It is startling in that it is true of God, He is almighty and powerful and shows his power by showing mercy and pity. For us, for the world, almighty power, mercy and pity, are not three words that go together.

We think the best way to declare God's almighty power chiefly, is to make fire rain down from heaven. James and John would have agreed. To many, the fact that God does not wield His *almighty power* around like Zeus hurling thunderbolts from Mount Olympus is just further proof to not believe in Him. But would such a God really require faith? If God was a worldly God, if God was a tyrant, it would require a lot less faith to believe in Him and we would have little rational choice in the matter. But this is exactly the opposite. Belief in God requires faith, because God has turned what we consider to be true almighty power inside out. Declaring almighty power is not to be compared with the threat of nuclear bombs, of sudden death, or with fire raining from the sky. Instead, God shows us that Almighty power is declared chiefly in showing mercy and pity to sinners, and that is what should be truly frightening to the world.

St. Paul helps us with this faith in this morning's Epistle. St. Paul was not always a saint; his conversion was so complete and shocking that God changed his name from Saul to Paul. Saul persecuted the church, he instigated the stoning to death of St. Stephen the protomartyr, he dragged Christians out of their homes and churches and had them executed. He was the one whom the Early Church feared. He was the zealous pharisee, who thought he was serving his God by killing others. He thought that he was that extension of God's almighty power. And yet God showed him his almighty power by appearing to him in a blinding light, causing him to fall off his horse and go blind. After this experience our Lord changed Saul's name to Paul, restored his sight, and made him an apostle to the Gentiles. God declared his almighty power through St. Paul's testimony of God's great mercy and pity for

him. Paul was transformed by God's mercy and went from being like the Pharisee in today's Gospel lesson to being like the Publican.

The Gospel also challenges our conception of power with its portrayal of the Pharisee and Publican. We encounter first the Pharisee, apart from being very well dressed and well educated he is probably what some would consider the obvious saint. He goes about doing good, he fasts twice a week, he prays well, and he is generous with his tithes and offerings. He also seems to keep the law well, and, thus, he is a righteous Jew, and knows it, as evidenced in his self-congratulations. He does not worship God, he is not even praying to God in the parable, but rather he is worshipping himself and praying to himself. He has created a God in his own image. He believes that God has declared his almighty power through him, and through making him different from the likes of those publicans. God refuses to even hear his prayer. The Publican however, stands before God overwhelmed with awe, he recognizes that he is a sinful man and will not even lift up his eyes to heaven. He bends his head low before God, and while the Pharisee makes him the brunt of his prayer, we see the Publican prayer ascend like incense up to the throne of Heaven.

We are reminded again in this parable that God declares his almighty power not through the prideful and boastful, not through the greatest displays of destructive and overwhelming power, but by mercy and pity. This is the almighty power of God that the world should be afraid of, that God shows mercy and pity on the worst of sinners and uses them to change the world. God is accomplishing His plans without the force of might worldly leaders employ. And while we struggle with the concept that our God is totally otherworldly, that His priorities are the opposite of the priorities we see all around us, let us remember that God's secret weapon is mercy which moves him to pardon sinners; his pity moves him to help them. God does not legislate peace, He does not force peace with His almighty power, He is bringing about peace and building His kingdom here on earth one soul at a time. The conversion and salvation of a sinner is a work of God's mercy which shows his greatest power, the power to forgive sins.

The mercy required to make us right with himself was nothing less awful than the blood-shedding and obedience unto death of his Son, Jesus Christ. The pity of God which is required to allow us to grow in his love throughout our lives and become holy is nothing less than the operation of God's Holy Spirit in our lives. And so we pray today that God will *Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace that we, running the way of thy commandments may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure.* Incredible as it seems at times,

God's grace is more than sufficient for all our failings and needs. We pray for grace which is adequate to our individual needs. The Lord said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness", which led Paul to realize that, as a Christian, "when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Cor. 12. 9, 10). By striving to obey the commandments we show our willingness to cooperate with the Holy Spirit working within us, which marks us as the Children of God, *and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ* (Rom. 8. 16, 17). For *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.* (I Cor. 2. 9).