

Josh 20 Cities of Refuge
Tim Anderson 6/12/20

Today's passage is about mercy.

Mercy is a character trait that most of us instinctively value very highly.

What is mercy?

It's giving people not what their deeds deserve,
but a kinder and gentler outcome.

Mercy is forgiving the debts of the poor
that they can never hope to repay.

Mercy is overlooking someone's offences
and giving them a second chance.

If you've been raised in a culture shaped by the Christian gospel,
you will almost inevitably value mercy as an idea.

It might surprise you to know that mercy is not universally valued.

The Ancient Greeks would have looked on mercy as weakness.

Cultures shaped by Islam and Hinduism are not overly given to mercy.

Muslims talk about Allah the merciful and compassionate.

But there is precious little in the Koran or in Islamic culture
that seems to be shaped by this claim.

Jesus is of course the great example of mercy.

We'll return to Jesus later in the sermon.

But at this stage we just notice
that mercy is at the heart of Jesus' mission.

Christians believe that our sin was so offensive to God
that there was no just way that we could obtain forgiveness.

We couldn't earn the right to have our sins taken away.

So when Jesus came to earth,
he was on a mercy mission.

In a spiritual sense,
he was here to forgive the debts of the poor
that we could never hope to repay.

But let's not rush to the end before we've looked at the start.
Our passage today shows us one of the places
where mercy was first practiced as part of a nation's law.

How does Law work?

Basically it's a way of having a system
where if you transgress by certain actions,
then there are certain consequences that flow from those actions.
Certain legal consequences.

In Australia, if you break the speed limit,
then you get a fine.

You transgress, there's a consequence.

In Israel, there was a system of reciprocal punishment.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

If you punched someone in the eye and they lost the sight in that eye,
then the judicial punishment was that you would lose an eye.

It sounds awfully harsh.

But bear in mind that it was not put in place to be harsh.

It was put in place to stop things escalating.

We've all seen things escalate.

Someone calls someone else a name.

Then that person hits the name caller.

Then there's a full on fight.

And someone gets seriously injured or worse.

It happened at Carrum station only a couple of weeks ago.

A legal system that can avoid escalation is not doing so badly.

But the thing with an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth

is that when it comes to someone whose life is taken,

that means the one who killed forfeits their own life.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life.

Well God decreed that in Israel,

it should be that way in the case of murder.

But mercy was built into the law

in the case that the killing was unintentional.

We can all see the difference.

On one hand you go after someone who has made you angry and deliberately kill them.

That's murder.

On the other hand,

consider the situation where you are driving along, and the brakes in your car fail, and you kill a pedestrian.

It's tragic.

But you wouldn't want to be treated like a murderer.

It was a tragic accident.

But you can understand

in a society where there was a strong ethic of retribution that a relative of the deceased person might want to even the ledger.

So that's where today's Bible reading comes in.

It establishes cities of refuge.

If someone was accidentally killed, then the killer could flee to one of these cities.

And the relative of the deceased person would not be able to take retribution.

And there are a bunch of structures set up to try to get a fair but merciful outcome.

1. Not everyone can take refuge in the city.

So in verse 4 it says,

"When they flee to one of these cities, they are to stand in the entrance to the city gate and state their case before the elders of the city."

It sounds like the elders of the city

have a role in determining whether this is a genuine case.

Well that's important.

You wouldn't want someone who actually committed a murder taking advantage of the cities of refuge to avoid punishment.

In verse 6 it says,

"They are to stay in that city until they have stood trial before the assembly." So it looks like there is a two stage process. The city elders evaluate the claim at the city gates. Just broadly checking that it might fall into the category of unintentional killing. And then there is a trial before the assembly where a final decision is made. Was it unintentional killing or was it murder? So there's a structure set up to try to determine truth as best they can.

2. The cities that are chosen are Levite cities. Remember that the Levites were given towns to live in. Not large allocations of land but places to live. It was their job to look after the temple and to teach the Law. Their income came from the sacrifices at the temple. And it was from these Levite towns that the cities of refuge were chosen. Why is that important? Because it means that the elders of these towns were the best versed people in the Law of the Lord. These were the people whose job it was to judge disputes in Israel. So these are the people best equipped to decide whether a certain case was indeed accidental killing.

3. The cities that are chosen are spread throughout the land. If you are fleeing for your life to a place of refuge, you'd like that place to be reasonably close. The six cities that are chosen are three on each side of the Jordan river, one in the north, one in the middle and one in the south. Everyone has reasonable access to a city of refuge.

So the system is set up to try to get a just but merciful outcome in the case of an accidental killing.

It's also set up so that the value of the life of the person who has died is recognised. If we go back to the example I used before of an accidental killing, where the car brakes had failed. Well you might not have killed someone deliberately. But it's possible that you had failed to get your car serviced and were driving a dangerous vehicle. It's possible that you were driving too fast for the conditions. There are all manner of situations where even though we are not talking about a murder, the person who has killed another person needs to take some responsibility. In Australia, you might get charged with dangerous driving or something. How was the seriousness of the situation recognised in Israel? Well basically, when a person flees to a city of refuge, they have to stay there. They can't just return home. Even after the assembly has met and decided that it was an accidental killing, they can't just return home. Now that's quite disruptive. It's not quite like going to jail. But it means that you've left your land and your family behind. There might be a husband or wife back home. There's likely to be a job that you've left. Well I guess the husband or wife could also relocate to the city of refuge. But you understand that this is not a get out of jail free card. If you go to the city of refuge, you escape with your life, but your life is going to be turned upside down for a while. Potentially quite a long while. And that is the way this law values the life of the person who has died. Even if they are killed by accident,

there are consequences.

How long must the killer wait before returning home?

They have to wait until the death of the high priest.

Now that sounds a little strange to us.

We are used to thinking about a certain offense
attracting a penalty of a certain number of years.

But the death of the high priest,

well it could happen tomorrow or he could live another 20 years.

It seems a bit arbitrary.

But there's a theological logic to it.

The person in the city of refuge has blood on their hands.

Someone died because they were careless or unlucky or negligent.

And in God's logic, if you have blood on your hands,
then justice demands a payment in blood.

So that's why you wait until the death of the high priest.

The high priest's death is a blood payment.

His life for the life of the person who was killed accidentally.

Sometimes people ask,

"Why did the people in the Old Testament have to sacrifice animals
so God could forgive their sins?

Why couldn't God just forgive them?"

The reason is because sinning against God is punishable by death.

The price had to be paid.

The animal gives its life as a substitute for the life of the sinner.

Which of course leads us to Jesus.

Sometimes people ask,

"Why did Jesus have to die on the cross that we might be forgiven?

Why couldn't God just forgive us?"

The answer is the same.

Sinning against God is punishable by death.

The price had to be paid.

And just like with the cities of refuge,

it is paid for by the death of the high priest.
Jesus is our great high priest.
His life for the life of the sinner.
Justice demands it.
The price has to be paid.

But like with the city of refuge,
protection is not automatic.
What happens if you accidentally kill someone,
and you don't run to the city of refuge?
Well the avenger of blood might come and kill you.
You are not safe.
Jesus is our city of refuge.
What happens if you sin against God,
and you don't run to Jesus?
Well you will have to pay the penalty for your own sins yourself.
There's no might about it this time.
The avenger of blood in the Old Testament was just a human being.
They may or may not be successful in extracting justice.
But when it comes to sin, God himself is the agent of justice.
The price will be paid,
either by the sinner or by the Lord Jesus.

What is the application of this passage for us?
Well first and foremost,
the OT is there to point us to Jesus.
That's its primary function.
It might look like a history book.
But that's just a clever disguise.
It's actually there to point us to Jesus.
Paul puts it this way in writing to the Corinthians.
"These things happened to them as examples.
(Them, that is the people from the Old Testament.)
They were written down as warnings for us,
on whom the culmination of the ages has come."

The culmination of the ages comes in Jesus.
It's all written down to point us to Jesus.

So the application for us is this.

Jesus is our high priest.

Those who fled to the city of refuge couldn't go home
until the death of the high priest.

It's only through the death of our high priest
that we can go to our spiritual home.

Jesus is our city of refuge.

When you've done the wrong thing,
you need to take refuge in Jesus
before the avenger of blood comes to get you.

Those are the principal points of application of this passage.
It's the Bible.

The whole book is about Jesus.

But if you want to,

you can find some other secondary points of application.

So for example there is an ethical application about intention.
Intention matters to God.

The treatment of someone who killed a person accidentally
is totally different to someone who killed a person deliberately.

That's a very strong qualifier to the often quoted,
"Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth."

Yes, and eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

We don't want things to escalate out of hand.

But yes also, if something bad happens but unintentionally,
we want a legal set up with mercy embedded right at its heart.

That's what these cities of refuge are.

They are mercy embedded at the heart of the OT Law.

Now this is a legal system with mercy at its heart.

This was unique to Israel in the ancient world.
You can bet your bottom dollar that the Canaanite nations had no such provisions of mercy in their criminal code. And these provisions of mercy have influenced the legal systems of all of the countries whose legal systems were based on the Judeo Christian worldview. So in Australia today, if they want to convict you of something, they have to prove not only that you did it, but that you had a 'criminal mind'. That is to say intention matters in Australian Law. Intention matters in Australian Law historically because Australian Law is based on this law. It's a great blessing to Australia that right at a time when people are disavowing Christianity, we still have these concepts like 'intention matters' and 'mercy matters' at the heart of our law. These concepts are inherited from Christian faith. We can't say that Australia is a Christian country. That's overreach. Arguably that's always been overreach. But it's certainly overreach now. Uganda is a Christian country. Australia is a country where Christianity has had a very strong influence. But we can correctly point people to things they value about our nation that whether they realise it or not were inherited from Christianity. And a merciful legal system is one of those things.

So here's an application to us.
We can value the things about our nation that are inherited from Christianity.
We can do that when we are talking about our nation.
I'm proud that Australia is prepared to talk about human rights in Tibet and for the Uighur people.

It's costing us a lot of money.
But human rights is something we stand for as a nation.
And it's something that we inherited from Christianity.
I'm glad we value something of our Christian heritage.
You see you need to add the last bit.
Everyone will agree with you about human rights.
But it's the fact that human rights were inherited from Christianity
they may not know.
It's worth reminding folk of that.
Or telling them that for the first time if they didn't know.
If you'd like to find out
about parts of our culture that are inherited from Christianity,
a few people from church are reading 'The book that made your world'
at the moment.

Here's another application of this passage to us.
Mercy matters.
It matters to God.
He built it into his legal system in the OT.
He sent Jesus to die for us as a great act of mercy.
If mercy matters to God then mercy should matter to us.
It's easy to love mercy when you are on the receiving end.
Who doesn't like that Jesus died on the cross for their sins?
But mercy is a bit more of a tricky concept
when you need to be the dispenser of mercy.
When someone richly deserves to get what's coming to them,
it's much harder to see the value of mercy.
I was in a situation a couple of weeks ago
where a person was being offered all kinds of second chances
after some pretty atrocious behaviour.
It's kind of easy to give someone a second chance
when they really appreciate it.
But when they carry on as if it's their right to behave appallingly.
And that by being given a second chance
they are only getting exactly what they deserve.

Mercy really grates at that point.
I had to be reminded by a non Christian
that mercy was good in that situation.
Jesus didn't wait until we were super appreciative
before he died on the cross for us.
It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us.
God shows mercy to the unappreciative.
Though in the end you need to have a change of heart
to get the benefit of the mercy.
But at the time he was showing mercy,
hanging on a cross,
it sure didn't look like anyone was appreciating it.

Well I've talked about some of the secondary points of application.
But I don't want you to forget the number one application.
So I'll leave you with that.

Jesus is our high priest.
Those who fled to the city of refuge couldn't go home
until the death of the high priest.
It's only through the death of our high priest
that we can go to our spiritual home.
His blood instead of our blood.

Jesus is our city of refuge.
When you've done the wrong thing,
you need to take refuge in Jesus
before the avenger of blood comes to get you.
Take refuge in the Lord.