The Beatitude of Mercy: Love watches over Justice


This little book is a theological exploration of a too-neglected topic, namely the importance of mercy and its relationship to justice. As Michael Putney suggests in the Foreword, contemporary Christianity is often associated with, even given credibility for, its promotion of social justice. However, as he goes on to state, the biblical and theological significance of social justice needs the “larger framework and context
of mercy, the mercy of God, the mercy we have all received and the mercy we are called to share with others” (8). This book points us in the direction of this larger framework and context.

Its author, Terry Veling, begins with the question: “What is more important in the world – to act justly or to act mercifully?” (9). Admitting this is a false dichotomy, we are provided with a wealth of insight into the realities of and relationship between justice and mercy. Relying on Jewish and Christian sources – including poets and prophets, philosophers and mystics, theologians and song-writers, – the book’s three chapters deal respectively with “Social Justice,” “Social Mercy” and “Social Healing.” They are written less from an analytical perspective than as an extended meditation in which various voices are brought into a rich conversation.

At the beginning of the key chapter on social mercy, the author takes us on an imaginative tour of his theological library in which he notes the books’ indexes contain a paucity of references to mercy – whereas references to justice abound. This relates to his earlier comment that the language of justice is more rational and discursive, whereas the language of mercy, being more poetic, resists such formulation (10). Indeed, mercy, he says, tends to be “hidden and unknown” (24) and yet, without it, true biblical justice is unthinkable.

Mercy is shown in its intimate embrace of key biblical categories such as repentance, forgiveness, conversion, compassion and solidarity. Consequently, to speak of social mercy is to speak of social healing and the restoration of broken relationships. Yes, social justice is also needed, but in the words of the author: “Mercy is the very foundation
of justice, such that without social mercy, our quest for social justice will always be misguided and thwarted” (55).

This is a book for those who wish to deepen their understanding of both justice and mercy in the Judaeo-Christian tradition – and indeed for anyone who wishes to learn something of what it means “to dwell mercifully in the world” (28). Written in a most engaging style, it is ideal as a basis for retreats, homilies and religious education lessons. It is also the kind of work that one could profitably use on a quiet evening for prayerful reflection and spiritual well-being – since “mercy is at the heart of God” (36).

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