

MERCY FROM PERIPHERIES AND JUBILEE FROM THE CENTER.
THE RECIPROCAL FECUNDITY OF VISIONS AND STRUCTURES IN SOME TEXTS OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT

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Introduction

Vision and Structure

The basic premise of this article is that in any complex society, there is a mutual interrelationship between the periphery and the centre. It is this article's intention to highlight how this interrelationship is also valid for the relationship between Mercy and Jubilee.

In the New Testament, the traditional center of religious processing, Jerusalem, is relativized, while the peripheries are of particular importance. It is Jesus who becomes the new center, and it is the community that is formed around this center, the church, which is constituted as a peripheral reality. The role of this periphery is to get in touch with the peripheries (mission).

In the New Testament, the interaction between the peripheries and the center is constituted as an exchange between vision and structure, respectively.

Vision is the perspective on how the existence might be otherwise; it is the opening of new existential possibilities. It is the imagination of what may be possible, which, by the mere fact of being imagined, is capable of being turned into reality. Vision is typical of the peripheries, because it is there where the energy to change reality is focused. Peripheries are unstable, subject to change, and are permeable, open to the influences of other peripheries and centers. Instability and permeability are the germination environment for new existential visions.

Structure is the organization of procedures by the center in order to avoid instability and permeability, and to make the vision accessible, experienceable, and repeatable. Structure consists of elements such as: time, space, rituals, practices, norms, functions. Thus the personal growth potentially inherent in the vision is specified and made available. The structure is put together by the center because the center, by its very nature, tends to stability. Stability is preserved through the organization of procedures. While on the one hand, the procedure prevents the proliferation of new visions, on the other hand it is the means to ensure the reception of the vision - developed from the periphery - by the center.

Between visions and structures there is a relationship of mutual fruitfulness. To process structures, the center needs vision, which can be supplied from the peripheries. To ensure the survival of the vision, the peripheries need structures/procedures that can be elaborated from the center. The vision fecundates the structure, and the structure enriches the vision. A vision without structure remains incomplete, and a structure with no vision remains sterile, and becomes formalism.

The relationship between Mercy and Jubilee in the New Testament can fall into and be compared to the relationship between vision and structure, periphery and center. Mercy corresponds to vision, and the Jubilee to the structure.

Mercy and Jubilee

The peripheries, because of their state of religious marginalization, are more sensitive to the issue of Mercy, and can be understood as vision/perspective/content oriented to open new opportunities for total growth for people.

The Jubilee is a form of religious structure aimed at making Mercy's vision repeatable and accessible.

Some examples of circular interaction between the peripheral vision of Mercy and the Jubilee central structure in the New Testament:

Matthew 5-7: The Sermon on the Mount. The blessed ones are the peripheries which have the vision of Mercy, while Jesus, as a center, structures the Law. The Law of Jesus is that of Moses, but seen from another point of view. While the Mosaic Law is considered, by most of the Old Testament texts, from the point of view of the external execution, Jesus takes the perspective of the internal motivation. This is a Jubilee act because Jesus reaches out the peripheral instance for Mercy. The most effective way to welcome the request of the peripheries about Mercy, is to focus not on an external law, but on the inner law (cf. Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36).

Mark 7:24-30 and 8:1-10: The Syrophenician woman and the multiplication of the loaves. The quest of the Syrophenician woman expresses the vision of the Mercy of a periphery, while the multiplication of the loaves for the Gentiles indicates a repeatable structuring and of that vision (Jubilee).

Luke 4:16-30 and 7:18-23: The Nazareth manifesto, and the work of the Messiah. Jesus himself is the Jubilee of the Father. Christ is the structure put in place by the centre to make the Mercy accessible to the peripheries.

Luke 15: Three parables about penitent sinners and unconverted righteous. While sinners express the necessity and reality of Mercy, the three parables of loss and recovery show the reason for the feast, to indicate the structuring of Mercy by the center.

John 12:1-11 and 13:1-20: Mary anoints Jesus' feet, and Jesus wash his disciples' feet. The vision of Mary who anoints Jesus' feet (connected to the theme of Mercy because of the implicit quotation of the forgiven sinner in Lk 7:36-50), becomes the structure (Jubilee) of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, in order to make repeatable and accessible the intuition of the woman.

Acts 2:37-42 and 2:43-47: The first converts, and the Church of Jerusalem. The repentance of the crowds/peripheries (vision of Mercy), receives a structure in the four basic elements of the Christian community: apostles' teaching, communion, Eucharist, prayer. These elements are intended as a structure that makes available the growth potential of people inserted in the Church.

The interaction between peripheral vision of Mercy and central Jubilee structures, indicates the hermeneutic circularity (interpretation) between the poles of the horizontal and vertical communication. The center needs the peripheries in order to articulate its vision, and the peripheries need the center to make their vision repeatable and accessible (structure), that is, to translate it in total growth opportunities.

Now let's see the meanings of Mercy and Jubilee in the Old and New Testament.

Mercy in the Bible

To designate the concepts that we summarize with the term "Mercy", the Old and the New Testament use a variety of words.

The most important terms in the Old Testament are *racham/rachamim* (~x;r'/~ymix]r) and *chesed* (ds,x,).

Rachamim indicates bowel, entrails. The singular *rechem/racham* indicates the womb, and the meaning of tender care. It is easy to see the transition from the literal womb to the plural *rachamim*, compassion. *Rachamim* indicates an emotion, and signifies something that goes beyond what ought to be given. *Rachamim* is a warm compassion, ready to forgive, to replace judgment with grace. *Racham/rachamim* is generally attributed to God, although there are some exceptions: Joseph is overcome with compassion for his brothers (Gen 43:30), and the mother feels mercy when the child is going to be cut in two (1Kgs 3:26). The term therefore designates the feminine/maternal side of the Mercy of God. A visceral, profound, radical, absolute, emotional Mercy. God's Mercy is

not like a passing sentiment. God is all Mercy, he is driven away in his Mercy because it is a quality that touches his being as Creator¹.

While *rachamim* refers to the emotional dimension of Mercy, *chesed* touches the volitional and rational aspect, without neglecting the feelings. *Chesed* is the faithful love of God, a love of predilection, of choice. It is a constant attribute of God's covenant with Israel. *Chesed* is related to a concept of faithfulness, steadfast love, kindness. In the post-exile, a parallel between *chesed* and *rachamim* is established, which is important for the development of both concepts. The contact of *chesed* with *rachamim*, makes assume to the former also the meaning of forgiveness².

Mercy in the New Testament is expressed by three words: *eleos* (ε;λεος), *oiktirmos* (οικτιρμος, j) and *splanchna* (σπλα, γcna).

Eleos indicates an attitude and emotion aroused by the empathy for the difficult conditions of another person (Lk 1:78)³. This term also describes the grace of God, his love, his faithfulness (Rom 11:31)⁴.

Oiktirmos is synonymous to *eleos* as a motivating emotion: sympathy, mercy, pity. In the Septuagint the term translates *rachamim*⁵.

Splanchna indicates, as *rachamim*, intestines, viscera, inward parts of the body (Acts 1:18). Originally the word meant performing a cultic banquet⁶. In ancient Greek literature *splanchna* are the seat of violent feelings. In the Hellenistic period it becomes the place of tender feelings (Sir 30:7; Wisdom 10:50), and of motherly love⁷.

The plurality of words for Mercy in the New Testament, indicates that Mercy is a complex, multifaceted reality. At the same time it is a reality unified around the central core of love for God's creatures.

The first feature of Mercy in the New Testament is that it assumes a theological and Christological character. Christ himself is the Mercy of the Father. Here Mercy is no longer just a concept, but a person. So Mercy is the Christological personification of God's infinite love.

The second feature of Mercy in the New Testament is the unconditional acceptance of human limitations. De Vaan explains that the Latin word *miser cordia* is formed by the Latin words *miser* ("poor, unfortunate") and *cordia* ("heart"). *Miser* is possibly connected with *maereo*, which means "to be sad, mourn" (see *maestus*, *maestitia*)⁸. Mercy, then, is to have heart, that is love, attention, care, for people who find themselves in any state of material, spiritual, psychological, social, and relational poverty.

Also the English word "Mercy" is important for the understanding of the concept. The term comes from the old French *mercit*, then *merci*, which in turn is derived from the Latin *merces*, *mercedem*, "reward, fee". In Christian Latin, from the 6th century, it is often used in the sense of *miser cordia*, and in that of thanks. The word is applied to the reward in heaven, which is earned by kindness to those who cannot reciprocate⁹.

Different languages provide various insights of what Mercy is. There is the reference to the entrails and the motherly womb (the Hebrew *rachamim*, and the Greek *splanchna*); there is the reference to the "masculine" love of choice, at a volitional and rational level (the Hebrew *chesed*); there is the empathy for the needy (the Greek *eleos* and *oiktirmos*); there is the reference to the heart (the Latin *miser cordia*), in the biblical sense of the seat of rationality and will, or in the late sense

¹ Cf. M. BUTTERWORTH, "~xr", 1093-1094; S.-K. WAN, "Mercy, Merciful", 46.

² Cf. D.A. BAER – R.P. GORDON, "dsx", 211; S.-K. WAN, "Mercy, Merciful", 47.

³ Cf. F. STAUDINGER, "evlee, weleeo", col. 1144.

⁴ "In the LXX, *eleos* normally translates *chesed* and occasionally *rachamim*". S.-K. WAN, "Mercy, Merciful", 48.

⁵ Cf. S.-K. WAN, "Mercy, Merciful", 48.

⁶ Cf. N. WALTER, "splanchni, zomaisplanchnizomai", col. 1389; LIDDEL H.E. – SCOTT R. – JONES H.S. – MCKENZIE R. (ed.), "splanchni, uw", 1628; "splanchni, gcnon", 1628.

⁷ Cf. N. WALTER, "splanchni, gcnonsplanchnon", col. 1391-1392.

⁸ Cf. M. DE VAAN, "Miser, -a, -um", 383; "Maereo", 358.

⁹ Cf. J.A. SIMPSON – E.S.C. WEINER (ed.), "Mercy", 625.

the seat of feelings; and there is the allusion to the eternal reward that Mercy brings (the English Mercy).

Jubilee in the Bible

The only mention of the Jubilee in the New Testament is in Luke 4:16-30, which is a quotation from Isaiah 61.

The instructions for the biblical Jubilee are given in Leviticus 25. The Hebrew word *yobel* has an uncertain origin. The term means “ram”, as the ram’s horn was used as a trumpet to announce the start of the Jubilee year. But the most used word in Leviticus 25:9 is *shofar*. The year of Jubilee was falling at the end of the seven-year sabbatical cycle. Leviticus 25:8-10 specifies it as the fiftieth year, although some scholars think that dropped on the 49th year. In this year it was proclaimed the freedom of the Israelites who had become slaves for debts, and the return of land to families who had been forced to sell it for economic needs in the previous 50 years. The Jubilee was essentially an economic institution with religious value. It was meant to ensure the ownership of land by the household and the clan. The theological motivation was that the land belonged to God, and the Israelites are considered guests and residents in God’s land. The Jubilee served to prevent the eventual concentration of land in the hands of a few wealthy families. In this way the Jubilee preserved the socio-economic fabric of society, and the relationship of Israel with God, and was perceived as inextricably linked with the possession of the land¹⁰.

We do not know if the Jubilee year was ever celebrated. Some authors think that the law of Jubilee is a late and idealistic formulation, of the same period of the Holiness Code (Prestly Tradition). Other scholars believe that it is a pre-monarchical custom, which fell into disuse. Wright argues for this position, because the purpose of the Jubilee is to maintain or restore the covenant with God through the bond of the clan and the family with the land. This concern is not within the theology of exile and post-exile. The Jubilee assumes a situation where a man, even if in debt, continues to own the land. With the advent of the monarchy that has no meaning. In fact, the Jubilee is never mentioned by the prophets, except in a metaphorical sense¹¹.

The Jubilee is an institution based on the inalienable link between the family and the earth. The land is seen in the theological/spiritual and socio-economic function. This intrinsic link between the two dimensions of the earth is the evocative power of the Jubilee metaphor. The Jubilee ensures periodic restauration of the links between the family, the land, God, and society. The Jubilee gives dignity to each and every family, seen as the backbone of society. Healthy families – spiritually and economically – give birth to a healthy society. The Jubilee says that everything is connected. There is not a rift between spiritual, theological and social, economic dimensions. The economy, prosperity, enters into the divine plan for humanity. And the land plays a crucial role in the connection between spirituality and economics.

After having been created as a socio-economic and religious institution, the Jubilee acquired new life as a metaphor, used by the prophet, to show the possibilities of hope given by God to his people. The Jubilee is a powerful metaphor for the function of a structure, as we have seen above. The Jubilee is the organization and institutionalization of instances of Mercy. The return to freedom from slavery, and the return of the land to its formers owners/custodians, does not follow the laws of the market, nor any other laws, but only the principle of unconditional love given by God to his people.

In the following texts we will see two examples of interaction between the vision of Mercy coming from the peripheries, and the Jubilee as a response by the central institution.

¹⁰ Cf. C.J.H. WRIGHT, “Jubilee, Year of”, 1025-1027.

¹¹ Cf. C.J.H. WRIGHT, “Jubilee, Year of”, 1027-1028.

1. From the Crumbs to the Multiplication of the Loaves: Jubilee as Messianic Banquet (Mk 7:24-30; 8:1-10)

The first couple of texts chosen to illustrate the interaction between peripheral vision and central Jubilee structure, is given by the episodes of the Syrophenician woman, and the second multiplication of the loaves. Here the synergy between Mercy and Jubilee rotates around the symbols of bread, banquet, and family.

Context

The two texts are inserted in the context of the opening of Jesus towards the Pagans. It is extremely important, for our purposes, to notice the passage between the first and the second multiplication of the loaves. The first multiplication of the loaves represents the Eucharistic eschatological messianic wedding banquet reserved for Israel. With the first multiplication of the loaves, Jesus presents himself as the ultimate messenger of God who brings the messianic promises to fulfillment through the inauguration of the banquet for Israel.

In the transition between the first and second multiplication of the loaves, we find a series of texts that prepare the reader to acquire a mentality of openness towards the Gentiles. Jesus walks on the sea and the disciples “were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mk 6:51-52 NRSV). This phrase is meant to communicate the readers that they have to pay attention to the meaning of the multiplication of the loaves.

After that, Jesus enters into Pagan territory, and there he heals people (Mk 6:53-56). When he returns to Israel he discusses with the scribes and the Pharisees about the pure and the impure (Mk 7:1-23). This is the decisive text that opens the door of the Eucharistic eschatological messianic wedding feast for Pagans. It is here that Jesus changes the concept of purity.

Jewish purity is based on three assumptions: 1) The world is divided between the sacred and the profane; 2) The Israelites are the people chosen by God to maintain separation between the sacred and the profane, by virtue of their separation from the Pagans through the observance of the purity laws; 3) In the paradigm of separation the explicit action is more important than the intention that originates it.

Jesus relativizes all three of these requirements and introduces others: 1) That the world is not divided between the sacred and the profane (see the symbolism of the “curtain of the temple [...] torn in two, from top to bottom”, Mk 15:38 NRSV); 2) That the main paradigm of the Kingdom of God is integration (the banquet for the Pagans); 3) That in the paradigm of integration, intention is more important than action: “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (Mk 7:20-21 NRSV). This revolution had already been anticipated by the prophets (see the quotation of Isa 29:13 in Mk 7:6-7; see, also: Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36). It is a relative novelty, yet still a novelty.

With a new understanding of what is pure and impure, the Pagans have access to the messianic banquet, where they can enter into a relationship with the Bridegroom, and so enter into the Kingdom. Between the first and the second multiplication of the loaves the reader is accompanied on a journey through the dissolution of one of the most important Jewish paradigms for understanding the world: the concept of pure and impure.

Why are we accompanied through this journey? Because the Gentiles cannot be admitted to the eschatological messianic banquet unless they become Jewish, or unless the Messiah declares the abolishment of the concepts of pure and impure. This was the first main obstacle of the primitive church (see: 1Cor 8; Gal 3:24; Acts 15). Israelites were the people chosen by God. God is transcendent, simultaneously separate from the immanent world, yet present in it. In the Bible, separation is holiness. God is holy/separate, and Israel has to be holy/separate from other peoples. Holiness/separateness corresponds to purity. Israel must observe the rules of purity in order to maintain its relationship with the transcendent/separate/pure God.

How can Israel be holy/separate/pure? By adopting, beside the moral laws, the sanctity code. The sanctity code is a set of non-moral rules, such as: circumcision, observance of the Sabbath and other feasts, ablutions, and rules about foods. With the advent of the Messiah, and with his claim to be the universal Lord, how could the primitive church – which was preeminently Jewish – welcome the Gentiles into its communities? There were two options: lead the gentiles to become Jews (option adopted by the community of Jerusalem), or abolish the concept of pure and impure (option adopted by Paul, and which eventually became hegemon).

Between the first multiplication of the loaves (for Israel), and the second one (for the Gentiles), Jesus must abolish the paradigm (concept of pure-impure) that prevented the Gentiles from participating in the messianic banquet. The text of the Syrophenician woman is a landmark that paves the way towards the abolition of the concepts of pure-impure.

Crumbs for dogs (the Syrophenician woman, Mk 7:24-30)

The vision of Mercy is offered by a Gentile woman, whose daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit. She expresses her vision starting from the metaphor of bread and banquet introduced by Jesus. These then are the characteristics of this peripheral vision of Mercy: it is feminine, it comes from Paganism, it is associated with the liberation from demonic, and it concerns the true food for humanity.

The woman. In the Bible, the feminine is particularly associated with maternity (“The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living” Gen 3:20 NRSV), and it represents social groups (see the expressions: “virgin daughter Zion”, and “daughter Jerusalem” Isa 37:22 NRSV). Because of these two characteristics, the feminine is particularly associated with the divine.

The text of the Syrophenician woman presents a parallelism with the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-12). In both cases a woman tells Jesus that the time has come to move to the next phase of ministry. It seems that the woman is associated, by virtue of motherhood, to phases, to change, to the recognition of time. The feminine is peripheral because it is excluded from the decisions of power, but with Jesus the feminine becomes central. Jesus recognizes the value of woman’s discernment.

The Gentiles. The Pagan world, represented by the Syrophenician woman, perceives itself as excluded from the relationship with the divine, which is the main characteristic of Israel. However, Jesus, fitting into the great biblical traditions, does not intend or teach the complete exclusion of Paganism by Israel, and therefore exclusion by the grace of God. There is a sequence, an order, and Israel comes first. As can be inferred from the Gospels, the initial ministry of Jesus is reserved for Israel, with a gradual opening to the Pagan world. In the Gospel of Matthew there is a tension between what is said in 10:5-6: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (NRSV), and the words of the Risen Lord: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (28:19 NRSV).

The woman makes it clear to Jesus that the time to open the Kingdom to the Gentiles has come, and they cannot wait any longer. Why? Because of the demonic power.

Liberation from demonic. The Pagan world, not having access to the whole of truth and grace, has no defense against the demonic, and the demonic is parasitic. The Gospel of Mark presents many exorcisms performed by Jesus. One of the main features of the Kingdom is the immediate expulsion of the demonic.

The true food for humanity. Jesus establishes a link between the expulsion of the demonic and human nutrition.

At this point we can refer to the term “worship”, which does not appear in this text, nor in the multiplication of the loaves, but is present in the background. In Greek “worship” *proskynesis* means mouthing, or kissing. The original reference is to bring the hand to the mouth in order to send a kiss to the statue of the deity, or a prostration to kiss the ground in front of the statue of the

deity¹². At the level of symbology, the kiss represents the act of eating. The mother says to her child that she is going to eat him/her with kisses.

In this sense, worship is what man eats. We all have to eat something at a spiritual-psychic level. As human beings we are made to adore, that is, to find our food for our hunger of existential meaning. The true food is God himself: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to complete His work" (Jn 4:34 NRSV).

Idolatry is essentially to eat what is not God. We can feed ourselves on ourselves (narcissism), we can feed ourselves on things, pleasures, power, etc. The demonic, as it is parasitic, tends to draw energy from our idolatrous nutrients. It is for this reason that Jesus establishes a link between the expulsion of the demonic and the nourishment of humanity. Jesus prepares the eschatological messianic wedding feast not only for Israel but also for the Pagan world. Only by recognizing the true nourishment and by being nourished can the Pagan world be freed from evil.

The Syrophenician woman expresses, with her peripheral vision of Mercy, the need, also from the Pagan world, to feed on Christ, to have access to the Eucharistic banquet, which is an anticipation and pledge of the eternal banquet.

The woman acknowledges that in Jesus comes the time when the food for deep nourishment of man is no longer reserved for Israel, but is available to all.

Bread for the crowd (the second multiplication of the loaves, Mk 8:1-10)

In reply to the Pagan woman, Jesus establishes a multiplication of loaves for the Gentiles. This multiplication takes Jubilee connotations because it is a structure organized by the center in order to make the instance of the periphery both available and repeatable. This is precisely what the Jubilee is.

The peculiar features of this Jubilee action revolve around six major symbolic registers.

1) The first symbolic register is that of the banquet, emphasized by the numerous references to eat (Mk 6:31.36.37.42.44; 8:1.2; etc.), by the fact that people are made to sit (Mk 8:6; they sit in groups in Mk 6:39-40), and by the texts that belong to the context: the banquet of the death of John the Baptist (Mk 6:17-29), the discussion on eating with defiled hands (Mk 7:1-23), and the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod (Mk 8:14-21).

2) It is a wedding feast because the previous chapters contain various nuptial references. The first of these references is the banquet of King Herod, reprimanded by the Baptist for not being the legitimate husband of Herodias (Mk 6:17-29), while Jesus is the legitimate Bridegroom-Messiah of Israel. There is a deliberate contrast between the anti-nuptial banquet of Herod and the wedding banquet of the Messiah: the first is oriented to death, the second is the bearer of life.

Another nuptial reference is given by healing of the hemorrhagic woman and the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:21-43). Both women are characterized by the number twelve: twelve years of suffering for the woman (Mk 5:25), and twelve years of life for the girl (Mk 5:42). They represent Israel as a sick woman, close to death. Jesus is presented as the Bridegroom (see the reference to the cloak and robes, Mk 5:27-27, as in Ruth 3:9) and the Doctor (Mk 5:26).

Also the text of the Syrophenician woman has a clear nuptial connotation. As in the episode of the hemorrhagic woman and Jairus' daughter, there are two suffering women. They represent the Pagan world which waits for the one who is the Bridegroom and Physician, Jesus.

3) The Bridegroom is the Messiah, the final Messenger of God.

4) The messianic wedding banquet is eschatological, as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies (Isa 25:6; 55:1-2; Ps 22:27).

¹² "proskune, w (kune, w 'to kiss') [...]. Frequently used to designate the custom of prostrating oneself before persons and kissing their feet or the hem of their garment, the ground, etc.; [...]. To express in attitude or gesture one's complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure". F.W. DANKER, "proskune, w", 882.

5) The banquet is Eucharistic: “and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd” (Mk 8:6 NRSV; cf. Mk 6:41).

6) The banquet is open to the Gentiles, as is shown by the symbolism of the number seven: “He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’ [...] They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full” (Mk 8:5.8 NRSV). The number seven, in addition to indicating totality, fullness, represents the pagan nations¹³. The first multiplication of the loaves, however, represented the banquet reserved for Israel. The reference to the People of God was based on the number twelve, “and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish” (Mk 6:43 NRSV).

Conclusion

In these texts the peripheral vision of Mercy depicts the need, expressed by a woman, from the Pagan world, to have access to the same nourishment reserved for Israel. Such nourishment can be given only by the Bridegroom who prepares the eschatological wedding banquet to be opened to all nations.

2. From the Beatitudes to the Law: Jubilee as Internalization of the Law (Mt 5-7)

The second group of texts belongs to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). If we apply our perspective of interaction between the peripheral vision of Mercy and the Jubilee response from the center, we see that there is a close correspondence between the Beatitudes and the sayings on salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5: 3-16) on one hand, and the new interpretation of the Law by Jesus (Mt 5:17-7:27) on the other hand.

Context

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God with words, structuring in this way the new interpretation of the Law. In the following chapters (8-9) Jesus announces the Kingdom with deeds. The ten miracles in this section revolve around the symbolism of the house, to indicate the characteristics of the new community (symbolized by the house) of believers: it is a mixed community, it is composed of Jews and Gentiles (8:1-17); it is a community of followers (8:18-34); it is a community of sinners (9:1-17); it is a thriving community, which is alive, able to see and speak (9:18-34).

The relationship between chapters 5-7 and chapters 8-9, indicates that those who accept the Law as interpreted by Christ (5-7) live a new communal membership, no longer founded on the paradigm of separation, but one based on integration (between Jews and Gentiles, between righteous and sinners; 8-9).

The Sermon on the Mount presents a concentric structure:

Introduction 5:1-2: Preparation for Jesus’ teaching.

A) 5:3-16: Programmatic announcement: The true Prophets. The Law is put into practice by those who cultivate the inner attitude of the desire for justice (God’s will)

¹³ The seven baskets left over refer to the pagan nations present in the land of Canaan, listed in number of six or seven (Exo 3:8.17; 13:5; 23:23; 33:2; Deut 7:1; 20:17; Acts 13:19), and to the seven Hellenist deacons of Act 6:5. Cf. *Bibbia di Gerusalemme*, notes on Mk 8:1-10, and Deut 7:1.

B) 5:17-48: The mission of the new community: to fulfill the Law and the Prophets to be sons of the Father.

C) 6:1-34: Why put righteousness into practice (the goal): good works are to be performed not to gain power, but for the eternal reward arising from the personal relationship with the Father.

B^I) 7:1-14: The rule of love: is synthesis of the Law and the Prophets, to be children of the Father.

A^I) 7:15-27: Final synthesis: the false prophets. The criterion for distinguishing the true from the false disciples is the fulfillment of intentions through practice, realized action, which comes from cultivating the inner attitude of the desire for justice (God's will).

Conclusion 7:28-29: Amazement at Jesus' teaching.

At the center of the Sermon on the Mount is chapter 6. The thematic center of chapter 6 is the Lord's Prayer, and the center of the Lord's Prayer is the following statement: "Give us this day our daily (*epiousios*) bread" (Mt 6:11 NRSV). This invocation can be understood in the Eucharistic sense¹⁴. The believer can live the Law – as interpreted Christologically – in the relationship with the Father, and the relationship with the Father is possible through the Eucharistic banquet.

Hunger and thirst for justice (the Beatitudes, Mt 5:3-16)

In this text we do not find a single person who expresses to Jesus a vision alike to his/her own vision of Mercy. Jesus himself acknowledges this vision in all those "who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6 NRSV).

1) The most important feature of the peripheral vision of Mercy in Matthew 5:3-16 is the longing for righteousness, which is longing for the accomplishment of the will of God. Jesus addresses himself to everyone who is waiting for the Kingdom of God. One of the main reasons for the delay of the Kingdom is the wrong interpretation of the Mosaic Law. The Law expresses God's will, but when the Law is misunderstood, God can't manifest his Kingdom, his sovereign presence on earth. Jesus sums up the cry of all those who feel that something is wrong in the way the religious leaders (the center) deal with the Law.

2) Those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness/will of God, are also poor in spirit and meek. That is, they know that everything comes from God, they do not try to establish the Kingdom of God by their means. This is the deep meaning of the Greek term *praus* $\text{prau} < \text{j}$, which is translated as "meek, humble, gentle" (cf. Mt 11:29; 21:5). Matthew 12:18-21 is a quotation of Isaiah 42:1-4, in which the character of the Servant of God is applied to Jesus, and is depicted in his ability to spread the Kingdom of God not through violence, fighting, and/or self-imposition, but through the mysterious power of God himself. In the Gospel of Matthew the *praeia* praei / a , mildness of Jesus is particularly highlighted as one of the main features of the disciples.

¹⁴ The bread of the Lord's Prayer is a special bread, and is not a material bread, but a symbol. Furthermore, it is *our* bread, the bread of the community. The adjective *epiousios* cannot be found in any other part of the Bible, nor in the Greek literature. There are four interpretations of this term: 1) It refers to the bread necessary for the existence, the bread we need; 2) It is the bread beyond the substance, *supersubstantialem* in Latin, the bread of the Spirit; 3) It is the bread for the present [day]; 4) It is the bread for the coming [day], for tomorrow. The different meanings are not necessarily alternative, the term can be polysemantic, not unique. If this bread is asked to the Father, it means that it can only be given by God. It is not produced by man. This is a reference to the manna: the food of the messianic age (cf. Jn 6). Cf. P. Di Luccio, "Il pane 'quotidiano'", 261.273-275.

3) Those who are longing for the will/Kingdom of God, and who know that the Kingdom is not to be established by imposing an human institution, cultivate in themselves the habit of Mercy (*eleos* ε;λεος). They are prepared to welcome the Christological interpretation of the Law because they have shifted their perspective. For them the Law is still important (Mt 5:17-19), but they no longer consider the Law as an immutable order, but as a means to fulfill the will of God (Mt 12:1-14). They are merciful because they put others first, and not themselves (Mt 20:24-28), they put the man first, and not the Law or the institution, which are at the service of men.

4) They are “pure of heart” (*katharoi te kardia* καθαροι. th/| kardi, a|). The heart, in the Bible, designates not only the seat of emotions, but also the seat of intellect, rationality, and decision makings. Therefore, pureness of heart indicates people who know what is good for the world, who know how God acts. They know what they are looking for, they are completely devoted to their quest. They are focused without distractions, and they know what actions they are going to do in order to attain their goal.

5) They are “peacemakers” (*eirenopoioi* ειρηνοποιοι,), they live a peace that becomes action. Peace (*eirene* in Greek, *shalom* in Hebrew) is, according to the biblical traditions, a state of fulfillment that encompasses all sectors of life. Peace is the fulfillment of life.

6) Those who are longing for the will/Kingdom of God (hunger and thirst for righteousness), those who know that the Kingdom is not to be established by imposing an human institution (mildness), those who have shifted their perspective (Mercy), who are focused on the goals of God (pureness of heart), and are able to put them into practice (peacemakers), are the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”. The vision of Mercy emerges from the peripheries and is also linked to the remnant, a little group who welcomes the Kingdom of God.

This group *is* to be “salt” and “light”. It is important to notice that the verb “to be” is in the present indicative second person plural: “you are”. This means that being salt and light depends not on our goodness, accomplishments, achievements, strength of will, etc., but on our being disciples of Christ. We *are* constitutively, irreparably, and permanently salt and light (indicative). It means also that we are salt and light right now, not in a nostalgic past, nor in a utopian future (present). We are disciples as individuals rooted in a community (plural), and being salt and light depends on the word of Jesus, he who addresses each one of us, the one who recognizes us as persons (second person: you).

What does it mean being *salt* and *light*? The word “salt” in Greek is *alas* a[la]j, which shares the same root (*als*)¹⁵ as “sea” (*thalassa* θα, lassa) and “fisher” (*alieys* α`lieu, j). These semantic correlations refer the reader to the episode of the call of the first disciples:

18 As he walked by the Sea (*thalassa*) of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea (*thalassa*) – for they were fishermen (*alieis*). 19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people (*alieis*)” (Mt 4:18-19 NRSV).

Since the sea in the Bible symbolizes chaos and evil, being fishers of men means to share with Jesus the divine prerogative of helping people; to help people to get out of the evil. In light of this, to be the salt of the earth means to belong to a tiny group who has the power to contrast evil and to give people the possibility to attain full life.

“You are the *light* of the world” (Mt 5:14). The symbol of light (*fos* φω/j) evokes knowledge, comprehension, orientation, understanding. When applied to God and to Christ in particular, it indicates the project which underlies the universe, the central organizing principle of

¹⁵ The Greek root *als* (*salos* = “wave, rough sea”; *alme* = “sea water”) corresponds to the Latin *sal* (*sal* = “salt”; *salarium* = “ration of salt, wage”; *insula* = “in the midst of the waves”) and to the Sanskrit *sar* (*sara* = “fluid, liquid”; *sari* = “waterfall”, the traditional dress that falls like a waterfall; *sarit* = “river”; *salila* = “water, tear”). The three roots derive probably from the Indo-European *sal* = “bound to what flows, scroll upwards, jump”. Cf. F. RENDICH, “sr, sal”, 473.

everything, the meaning of all. Being light of the world means that the community of the disciples represents (normatively not exclusively) the central organizing principle of everything, which is Christ.

Summarizing, the vision of Mercy in this text is meek. It longs for the Kingdom of God which expresses itself in a shift of perspective and has the capacity to create a community of believers who identify and contrast evil and share with Christ the power to be the central organizing principle of the universe.

The daily Bread (the new interpretation of the Law by Jesus, Mt 5:17-7:27)

The vision of Mercy coming from the peripheries is recognized, accepted and reported by the Matthean Jesus. This vision becomes the peculiar characteristic of the disciple. Jesus is the new center and is also, at the same time, the synthesis of each periphery. He thus establishes a Jubilee structure oriented to make accessible and repeatable the peripheral stimuli.

The characteristics of this Jubilee structure fall into two: 1) The intimate/personal relationship with the Father; 2) The law of internalization.

1) *The intimate/personal relationship with the Father.* The core, not just of the Sermon on the Mount, but of the religious structure put in place by the Jesus of Matthew, is the intimate/personal relationship with the Father. Everything converges on this point, and everything originated from this point. This is the origin of each synthesis and analysis. It is the core of outward expansion and of the convergence towards the inside.

Often scholars, commenting on the Sermon on the Mount, highlight the extremely demanding ethical standards, asked by Jesus. In reality this is not left to the good will of the person. Commitment is certainly necessary, but the disciple is not alone in following the Law of Jesus. The believer is inserted into the energizing dynamism of the relationship with the Father (in Christ), inside the community.

The requirement of Mercy corresponds to the need to find and give confidence, to find and leave a door open. It is, ultimately, a need for hope, for the future, for new possibilities. The response of Jesus to this need is to relativize religious practices, by focus on the relationships.

2) *The law of internalization.* The personal relationship of the believers with the Father leads us to consider intention as an element prior to action. Jesus makes a decisive revolution in human history. Moral behavior cannot merely be about practice. It is not only about recognizing its role in regards to building community and trust. Neither is moral behavior only about extending morality to all, without distinction of affiliation. Truthfully moral behavior must come from the heart, from the interior of the person, because of the intimate relationship with the Father. The discovery of intention creates a new basis for the life of the community. Jesus fulfills the prophecies of Jeremiah 31:31-34, and Ezekiel 36:26-27:

33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:33-34 NRSV).

26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ez 36:26-27 NRSV).

Jesus indeed fulfills the prophecies, although with one major difference. While the prophets of the period of the exile intend interiority as internalization of the Law, for Jesus interiority consists of discovering one's relationship with God. It is a personal journey into the depths of the mystery. The personal relationship with God does not eliminate the need for the Law ("Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill"; Mt 5:17 NRSV), nor the need for the community. Indeed, it presupposes and grounds them. In the relationship with the Father, in Christ, the believer finds the source of Law. It is a Law that comes from the heart of the Father and is rooted in the human heart. Since the Father is the source of Law, meeting the Father means we come into contact with the source of all social relations.

Conclusion

The blessed ones in the Sermon on the Mount represent the peripheries which possess a vision of Mercy, while Jesus, as the center, structures the Law. The Law of Jesus is that of Moses, but seen from another point of view. While the Mosaic Law is considered, by most of the Old Testament texts, from the point of view of the external execution, Jesus assumes the perspective of internal motivation, which had already been discovered in some texts of the Old Testament (Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36).

The peripheral quest for Mercy in the Beatitudes is characterized by the fact that the poor are "poor in spirit", that is, their only and burning desire is to see the fulfillment of the plan of God for humanity and creation, the Kingdom. They are longing for the accomplishment of the will of God in history. Their true "poverty" consists in the fact that they think that they can do nothing to establish the Kingdom.

Jesus meets the periphery's quest for Mercy by changing the point of view of the interpretation of the Law: from action to intention. Action remains important (Mt 7:21) but as a result of a right intention, not as a means to obtain power (Mt 7:22-23). It is intention in coordination with action. The changing of perspective in the interpretation of the Law is a Jubilee act because Jesus establishes a structure that Makes mercy accessible and repeatable.

Why is focusing on intention – in putting into practice the Law – a response to the instance for mercy? The answer is twofold. First, because in this way Jesus proclaims that the poor in spirit can do many things for the Kingdom. The Kingdom belongs to God, but we can contribute, especially with our prayer, understood as a dialogue of the individual with the Father (see the Lord's Prayer). This is the foundation of the concept of interiority.

Second, because the transition from the external performance of the Law to the internalization of it, is one of the most powerful revolutions in human history. And it goes hand in hand with the discovery of the uniqueness of the individual. If the obedience to the Law is only external, society is more important than individuals. Feelings and thoughts are not relevant. The leaders control the group. Everyone can judge everyone else because the criteria of judgment are only external. There is no space for interiority, thinking, imagination, expression of feelings, and creativity. When these things cannot be expressed, they become sources of illness.

In giving authority to the poor in spirit to express their interiority in their unique relationship with the Father, and in building a community where the Law is internalized, Jesus manifests himself as the Healer. Interiority, thinking, imagination, expression of feelings, and creativity now become central, and in doing so, they are sources of healing.

The discovery of the Law in relationship to the Father brings two consequences: the discovery of the individual, and the hierarchy of norms. If Christians are called to find the source of their internalization of the Law, it means that they are called to make their own unique contribution toward the comprehension of God. Not only that, the believers are called by God to enter into a relationship with him in the totality of their particularity. In so doing, the believer may find that they can and should make a critical assessment of the Law. Such evaluation is expressed in a hierarchy of the Laws.

The discovery of interiority brings a series of chain reactions, with the consequence being to open the way to a new age in human history. Interiority leads to the discovery of the individual as a being constitutively in relationship with the Father, with Christ, with humanity, and with creation. A community - of any kind - is healthy when those who compose it leave room for diversity of individuality. The discovery of the individual leads to the critical evaluation of the Law. Relationship leads to rationality. "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Lk 12:57 NRSV). The critical evaluation of the Law leads to the hierarchy of norms. Jesus does not consider all the precepts on the same level. He makes a selection.

Christians have confidence in their understanding, evaluation and organization of reality. But they do not attempt this understanding in an atheistic, antisocial, individualistic, or narcissistic way. Christians understand reality and evaluate it precisely because they are related to the Father, in Christ. They know themselves to be in a relationship with all people and creation. The individual is triggered and inspired by their relationships, and relationships bear the unique footprint of individuals.

Finally, the selection of norms, the assessment of the Law, is intended to transform reality. Reality is transformable only if there are individuals who understand and possess the vision of a different reality that is perceived as possible. The individual Christian, locked in his/her room, intent on praying the Father, is the most innovative power that has ever appeared in history of humanity. S/he has the task of shaping to be what does not yet exist.

Conclusion

We have seen two cases of interaction between the vision of Mercy, on the part of the peripheries, and the Jubilee's structuring from the center, represented by Christ. The Syrophoenician woman and the poor in spirit, the eschatological banquet and the internalized Law, speak of opening horizons, of food, of healing, of roads to travel. We will have to remember, as a church, that we are not the center. The only center is Christ. We are peripheries, called to meet the peripheries of history, to listen, to take seriously their instances for Mercy. We are called to give hope, to open horizons, to knock down walls, to create new doors, and to cross bridges.

Jesus creates structures by means of the Word. We are also servants of the Word, custodians of meanings, and explorers of symbols. Words create new worlds, words nurture, just as in the messianic wedding banquet. Words give the power to internalize the Law, and thus to assume responsibility for our own life as a gift for others.

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Abstract

The basic idea of this article is that in any complex society, there is a mutual interrelationship between the periphery and the center. This interrelationship can be applied also to the relationship between Mercy and Jubilee. In the New Testament, the interaction between the peripheries and the center is constituted as an exchange between vision and structure, respectively.

Vision is the perspective on how existence might be otherwise; it is the opening of new existential possibilities.

Structure is the organization of procedures by the center in order to avoid instability and permeability, and to make the vision accessible, experienceable and repeatable.

The relationship between Mercy and Jubilee in the New Testament, can fall into the relationship between vision and structure, periphery and center. Mercy corresponds to vision, and the Jubilee to the structure.

In order to explain this point, I have chosen two couple of texts: the Syrophenician woman and the second multiplication of the loaves, and the beatitudes and the interpretation of the Law given by Jesus.

Parole-chiave

Periphery, center, vision, structure, mercy, Jubilee.

Curriculum

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