

Sunday 7th June 2026. Benefice BCP Holy Communion, Stonegrave.

“Go and learn what this means,” Jesus says in today’s gospel reading. He says it to the Pharisees who were complaining about Him eating with the wrong people, in their eyes - with the tax collectors and sinners, and so Jesus answers the Pharisees by saying: *“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”*

Now, we may not consider ourselves like the Pharisees, of course, but nonetheless, it would be a good idea this morning to look at what Jesus is saying - what “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” means to us in our lives, how we treat people, and how we demonstrate the love of God. Because this is not just good advice for the Pharisees, but for all of us, because if we are honest with ourselves, a lot of the time, our attitudes and behaviours are more like the those of the Pharisees than the followers of Jesus.

In this statement, Jesus is quoting the prophet Hosea from the Old Testament, who says, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.” It appears Jesus then changes the words from steadfast love to mercy, but as with the Greek word I quoted last week, ‘koinonia’ meaning both fellowship and communion, here the Hebrew word means both mercy and steadfast love.

The word in Hebrew is “hesed.” I can honestly say, it is the only Hebrew word I ever learned when I was training - because it had a massive impact on me. It’s an important word in the Old Testament and it is used over a hundred times in the Book of Psalms alone. It also appears in the books of the prophets such as Micah 6:8 - *“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness (hesed) and to walk humbly with your God?”*

Or Lamentations 3:22 - *“The steadfast love (hesed) of the*

Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Or the end of Psalm 23: “Surely goodness and mercy (hesed) shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Hesed then is often translated *mercy*, but it is sometimes translated *steadfast love*, or *goodness*, or *kindness*, or *compassion*, or *loyalty*. All of these are attempts to capture what this word, hesed, really means. So, when we return to Jesus’s command Jesus in the Gospel today - “I desire mercy (hesed), not sacrifice” - it means that God desires something more than just mercy. He desires kindness, and goodness, and loyalty, and our steadfast love. God desires *hesed*, in from us, not just sacrifice - not just the practise of religion, that the pharisees considered themselves to be perfect in and looked down on everybody else.

You might think this is a big ask, and it certainly is beyond us if we think we can do it on our own, but the truth is God is only asking us for what He already given us. Throughout the Old Testament, God shows us that his steadfast love for his people endures forever, that his goodness and mercy - His hesed - follows us all the days of our life.

Indeed, such is this hesed of God, that He also sent his only begotten son, Jesus, to show us this mercy and love in the flesh, as a human being, to save us. Jesus frequently said that the ‘Kingdom of God is near’, and He demonstrates this showing His mercy and steadfast love for all of God’s children. Jesus showed mercy and loving kindness to whoever needed it - Jewish leaders and lepers, Pharisees and fishermen, the wealthy and the poor, the tax collectors and the so-called sinners. Jesus showed that

same mercy to those who believed, and those who didn't believe, all of God's creation. It is why Jesus was born - to show us that love, to offer us that mercy, to heal the sick and to raise the dead, then to finally to go to the cross, bearing all our sins. This is hesed; steadfast, merciful, kind, loyal, everlasting, love.

How should we respond to this marvellous transforming gift? The first step and a step that must be repeated every day, is to realize just how loved we are. The God who created us could not love us anymore and could not love us any less. We are already fully and completely and unconditionally loved. Long before we ever try to return that love, or share that love, that same "hesed," is given to us, as to all of God's beloved children.

"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'" Jesus said to the Pharisees because they needed to hear it and to go and learn. Do you? If we have truly received, we don't have to go anywhere to learn what this means because it is best learned from Jesus himself and being His disciple.

Jesus shows us hesed throughout his life on earth and one day he will show us face-to-face. In the meantime, what are we to do? First, accept this merciful love, even if we don't think we deserve it. In fact, *especially* if we think we don't deserve it. Then make sure to share it with others who don't think they deserve it either. Share it with whoever in our world might be considered the tax collectors and sinners. Share it with the least of these among us, the poor, the forgotten, the lonely, the grieving.

Also, we are called to share it with one another, we who come to worship every Sunday. Everyone needs God's hesed and that includes all of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.