

The Quality of Mercy
Donna Bobin
Upbeat
V.3, n. 10, 1970

The birth of Christ means many things. It marks the beginning of the New Testament good news of love and forgiveness; the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to Adam and Eve; the promise of redemption for sins; the beginning of the life of Christ that was to culminate in the great sacrifice. As the medieval writers put it, Christ bought us with His blood, making possible, through His love, the forgiveness of sins. The birth of Christ also focuses attention on the perplexing problem man has recognized in Christianity. On one hand are the laws established in the Old Testament whose penalties for disobedience are, at times, awesome evidence of God's justice: expulsion from Paradise, 40 years' wandering in the wilderness. On the other hand is man's knowledge of his own imperfection, his own frailty that makes sin inevitable and his recognition that, on the scale of pure justice, he is lost and cut off from salvation. But the awareness that God is benevolent and merciful makes the question of God's judgment all the more confusing. There is still the law; there is still justice; and there are still the circumstances surrounding each transgression that cast doubt on man's ability to know how God will judge. If someone kills a man accidentally, how will God judge? If someone kills a man in war, how will God judge? How much will God understand the reasons for man's actions, and how much will His understanding affect His final judgment, where the line between justice and mercy lies has always been a problem that has plagued people, particularly some of the Elizabethan playwrights.

In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus sells his souls to the devil for 24 years' of having all his wishes granted. Faustus thinks he has gotten the better end of the bargain. He hopes to build a world "of power, of honor, and omnipotence," and he thinks he will become a demigod. To add to his feeling of security, Faustus doesn't believe in hell. He says, "I think hell's a fable," although Mephistophilis, a devil, is standing before him saying, "Ay, think so, till experience changes thy mind." Faustus soon learns from the devil and this, in itself, limits what Faustus can do with it. He squanders his power. As the years pass and the time nears for the devil to take him to hell, Faustus begins thinking of repentance. Unfortunately, Faustus doesn't really believe in God's mercy. Thoughts of repentance are driven out of his mind by thoughts of worldly pleasure and fear of physical pain the devil will punish him with if he learns of Faustus' desire to repent. Even though he doesn't believe in God's mercy, Faustus does believe in God's mercy. He believes that God could never forgive his sin of selling his soul, even though good angels and a pious old man try to convince him otherwise. As he waits for the devil to come, Faustus wishes he could be changed into an animal:

For, when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolved in elements;
But mine must live still to be plagu'd in hell.

In the end, Faustus is dragged off to hell. The man who wanted to be God is reduced to wishing he were an animal to escape punishment; he is a man who believed in God's justice and wrath but never trusted in His mercy and love.

Shakespeare, in contrast to Marlowe, chooses to emphasize love and mercy in his piety. *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, insists on justice, on adhering to the letter of the law. He lends money to Antonio who then lends it to his friend Bassanio who uses the money to woo Portia. It may seem a foolish thing to borrow a large sum of money just to lend it to a friend so he can court a woman who only *might* become his wife. But Antonio's action becomes meaningful in the Bassanio-Portia episode. To win Portia, Bassanio must choose correctly from three caskets. One casket is gold and bears the inscription "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire"; the second is silver and bears "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves"; the third is a lead casket bearing "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." Bassanio chooses the lead casket and wins Portia's hand, for love *is* giving, it *is* risking all one has, it is generosity and sacrifice. And these things also characterize Antonio's action in lending money to Bassanio.

But although Bassanio wins the hand of the wealthy Portia, he cannot help Antonio. Antonio, a merchant, depended on the arrival of several of his ships in order to repay Shylock. But the ships fail to arrive by the due date of Shylock's note. Bassanio offers to pay Antonio's debt. But Shylock insists that Antonio pay the penalty agreed upon: if Antonio could not repay the money by the date due, Shylock could claim a pound of Antonio's flesh. It is over the payment of this penalty that Antonio, Shylock, Bassanio and the citizens of Venice meet in court. When Portia, disguised as a young lawyer named Balthasar, attempts to defend Antonio, she tells Shylock that he must be merciful; but Shylock answers, "On what compulsion must I?" The law, after all, is the law, and Shylock demands it be fulfilled to the letter. In one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches Portia tries to explain mercy to Shylock. She tells him:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droopeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest—
It is blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.

It is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.
Therefore, Jew,
Though justice by thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us tall to render
The deeds of mercy.

But Shylock is still unmoved, he still wants his pound of flesh. However, Shylock catches himself in his own plot: he wants the letter of the law and the letter he gets. Portia tells him:

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more.
But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more
Or less than just pound – be it but so much
As makes it light or heavy in the substance
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple; nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair –
Thou diest, and all they goods are confiscate.

But no man has the precision of judgment that such a task would require; that precision of judgment is God's alone, and Shylock knows it and forgoes the penalty.

Christmas time is a time for celebrating the birth of Christ, and it is a time for us to consider all the things that life means to mankind. We hear often about man's faith in God; perhaps we consider too seldom God's faith in man—that poor, frail creature who lives his life midway between being an animal and being an angel. It is God's infinite faith in men that made His risk everything, even His own Son, who, by the Cross, bought us all with His blood. It is the infinite and divine faith that man will freely choose to follow the model that God's act and Christ's act present to him: that man will choose, in his own world, to season justice with mercy, to choose love rather than hatred to build rather than destroy. Surely that part of God that is within each of us tells us that we are most like God when we love, when we are merciful, that we can trust in God's mercy towards us when we ourselves have been merciful.