

Publishing Editor's column

THE DECISION of the Scottish Justice Minister to release Al Megrahi, the man convicted of the Lockerbie bombing, has created something of an international furore. Opinions are sharply divided. Some feel that the exercise of compassion, for a man said to be suffering terminal cancer and having less than three months to live, is a civilised response. Others think that the gravity of the crime, which left 207 people (including a brother in Christ) dead, outweighs any exercise of leniency towards the convicted person. The nature of politics and political comment is seen in the suggestion that the release is part of behind-the-scenes deals made to improve trade relations between the UK and Libya, albeit denied by senior politicians. The celebrations in Libya at the return of Al Megrahi, who has always protested his innocence, have done nothing to enhance the situation. In our present role as strangers and pilgrims we are not called upon to make decisions about the guilt or not of this man, nor about the sentence that should have been handed down. However, the incident does challenge us to think about showing mercy, and also our own need for mercy.

In the course of explaining his decision, the Scottish Justice Minister said, "However, Mr Al Megrahi now faces a sentence imposed by a higher power. It is one that no court, in any jurisdiction, in any land, could revoke or overrule. It is terminal, final and irrevocable. He is going to die". This is the position of all men and women. It is our position also. Although not guilty of mass murder, by God's righteous sentence we all die. As descendants of Adam we share his mortal nature, and, exposed to God's righteous laws, we fail to keep them and justify the sentence of death. God's prerogative is stated in the song of Moses: "See now that . . . I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of My hand" (Deut. 32:39). Wonderfully, in this statement of God's absolute right to kill and to wound, there is also the assurance that He is willing to make alive and to heal. Indeed, the song concludes: "Rejoice, O ye nations, with His people: for He will avenge the blood of His servants . . . and will be merciful unto His land, and to His people" (v. 43). Paul cites this passage in Romans 15 to remind readers that God's work of salvation in Jesus had been planned to include Gentiles, who should "glorify God for His mercy"

(vv. 9,10). This mercy means that "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10).

Recognising that God has been and is merciful to us, and that His children show His characteristics, we too must show mercy. The psalmist says, "With the merciful Thou wilt shew Thyself merciful" (18:25); and Jesus quotes this in the Sermon on the Mount, when he says, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt. 5:7).

An area where we can check how well we practise mercy is that of forgiveness. Jesus is especially demanding of us when he says, "And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also Which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mk. 11:25). Here is not the forgiveness that comes upon someone's confession of wrong. This is the recognition of a situation where we have been wronged, the offender has not come to repent and may not even be aware of the offence, but Jesus says we must forgive! One is moved to ask, Did Jesus do this? Yes! So, if we are serious about our discipleship, we will follow his example. He said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). We might be inclined to conclude that the context limits this to the soldiers who crucified Jesus. However, Peter, speaking after Jesus' resurrection to his contemporaries, who had killed the Prince of life, said, "brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers" (Acts 3:17). They did not know what they were doing! We suppose that their visceral hatred of Jesus blinded their eyes to the enormity of what they were doing. Their hearts were hardened by self-esteem and ambition.

For us, too, hardness of heart will blunt our sensitivity to God's standards and impair our willingness to forgive. It will stop us from following our Lord's example of compassion even towards his enemies. It will stop us from allowing the Word of God to develop in us the mind of Christ, who "committed himself to Him That judgeth righteously", and was content to leave the outcome to the One Who said, "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord".

Eric Marshall