Mercy is a popular word today not only in New Zealand but also in many other countries. When I drive around Auckland, I see the word ‘MERCY’ on the billboards of a variety of institutions, for example, Mercy Ascot, Mercy Radiology, Mercy Breast Clinic, Mercy Specialist Centre, Mercy Hospice, and many more. When I Google ‘Mercy’ on the internet I find many sites and I could spend hours reading about projects, pop groups, songs, poems, relief ships, schools, colleges, child care centres, soup kitchens, and many more about which I know little or nothing. As a word, ‘Mercy’ presents several challenges. The word has a rather narrow meaning in contemporary English denoting an act of clemency, as explicitly stated in The New Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of ‘Mercy’: Clemency and compassion shown to a person who is in a position of powerlessness or subjection, or to a person with no right or claim to receive kindness; kind and compassionate treatment in a case where severity is merited or expected, esp. in giving legal judgment or passing sentence; b) Forbearance, compassion, or forgiveness shown by God (or a god) to sinful humanity, or to a particular person or soul.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word ‘mercy’ appears at least 246 times and the word ‘merciful’ 53 times. In most of these instances, the words apply to God. If we look at the original sources, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), we find four Hebrew words, hesed, rachamim, hanan, and hus, each with its own particular nuance, all of which are translated interpreted as ‘mercy’, ‘steadfast love’, ‘covenant love’, ‘clemency’, ‘compassion’, ‘pity’. The most used translations of hesed, rachamim, hanan, and hus in commonly used English Versions of the Bible are: ‘mercy’, ‘steadfast love’ (NRSV); ‘goodness’, faithful love’ (NJB); ‘love’, ‘unfailing love’ (NIV); ‘mercy’, ‘steadfast love’ (ESV); ‘mercy’, ‘kindness’ (NKJV); ‘loving kindness’ (NAU); ‘faithfulness’ (TEV); ‘loyalty’, ‘constant love’ (REB). I discuss how hesed, rachamim, hanan, and hus appear in The Septuagint (Greek Version of the Old Testament) later in this article. See also my articles “Bible Texts that Speak of Mercy”; “Mercy Ever Ancient Ever New: Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy”, by Alice M. Sinnott. RSM.

Hesed is one of the words Old Testament writers use to describe a variety of human relationships: husband and wife in Genesis 20:13; next-of-kin in Genesis 24:49; father and son in Genesis 47:29; host and guest in Joshua 2:12-14 (Rehab and the spies); friends in 1 Samuel 20:8, 14-17 (David and Jonathan), and king and subjects in 2 Samuel 2:5. Inherent in the use of hesed to describe these human relationships is the concept of reciprocity. We see hesed in action in the account of Rahab delivering the spies and Jonathan protecting David from Saul. Anyone who
experiences the *hesed* of another is to reciprocate when the opportunity arises. Thus, the spies promise protection for Rahab, and David pledges to protect the house of Jonathan. Covenental fidelity and mercy are involved with each participant seeking to meet the other's needs in line with the requirement to show mercy to others. A command for justice usually accompanied this requirement as we see in Micah 6:8; Hosea 12:6; Zechariah 7:9.

God expects the Israelites to show *hesed* to one another because God shows *hesed* to them. We see this in Genesis 24:12-14 (Abraham); Genesis 32:10 (Jacob); 2 Samuel 7:15 (David), 2 Samuel 10:12 (Job). Above all, God is merciful to the chosen people Israel as we read in Exodus 15:13; Psalm 7:8; 107:21, 31; Isaiah 63:7; Jeremiah 31:2-6. The linkage of God's covenant and God's *hesed* is explicit in such phrases as “keeping covenant and showing *hesed*” in 1 Kings 8:23’ Deuteronomy 7:9; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:32; Daniel 9:4; Psalms 106:45; Isaiah 54:10. Another characteristic of God's *hesed* is its permanence described in Psalms 23:6; 25:6; 103:17; 117:2, and Isaiah 54:8. This idea also appears in the saying, “for the Lord is good, his mercy (hesed) is everlasting” or “God’s mercy endures forever” Psalm 100:5; 106:1; 107:1 118:1 1 Chronicles 16:3; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 7:3; Ezra 3:11; Jeremiah 33:11; Psalm 118:2-4; 136:1-26.

*Hesed* also appears in connection with other words that make its meaning more precise. The word *emet* meaning "truth" or "fidelity" is often linked with *hesed-emet*, “steadfast, dependable love”, and the “tender mercy of our God”; *hesed-sedekah* “righteous, holy love”, and *hesed-yesua* , “liberating, saving love”. In his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), John Paul II noted that *hesed* includes the notion of faithfulness to oneself, and to one’s vows and commitments to others. In note 52 of *Dives in Misericordia* document we read:

*When Old Testament writers use the word 'hesed' of God, it is always in connection with the covenant that God established with Israel. This covenant was, on God's part, a gift and a grace for Israel...God had made a commitment to respect it...[this divine 'hesed'] showed itself as what it was at the beginning, that is, as a love that gives, love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin.*

Many other Bible texts also present God's mercy as closely linked to God's covenant with Israel. Exodus 33:19; 2 Kings 13:23; Isaiah 54:10; 63:7 express this connection very clearly. Another characteristic of God's mercy is that it is expressed in God's actions, for example, God provides for the Israelites in the wilderness in Nehemiah 9:19; Isaiah 49:10 and delivers them from their enemies in Psalm 69:16-21; 79:8-11; Isaiah 30:18; and Jeremiah 42:11-12. However, when the Israelites are unfaithful to Yahweh they suffer. We read about this in Isaiah 9:17; 27:11; Jeremiah 13:14; 16:5; and Hosea 1:6-8; 2:4. On the other hand, God is forgiving and shows mercy to the Israelites when they are penitent, as in Psalms 25:4-7; 40:11-12; 51:1-4; Proverbs 28:13-14; Isaiah 54:7; 55:7; Lamentations 3:31-33; Daniel 9:9; Micah 7:19; and

As many of the texts above indicate, the Israelites understood their relationship with Yahweh through their experience of God’s _hesed_ in their lives and in the history of their ancestors. They believed that _hesed_ was primary in all God’s dealings with them. Isaiah 54:10 expresses this belief very clearly, "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you". To sum up, _hesed_ is mercy conveyed in steadfast, dependable, tender love and compassion as witnessed in personal integrity, honesty, being true to oneself and in one's commitments to others.

"_Rachamim_" is the second Old Testament Hebrew word translated as “mercy”. It comes from the word _rechem_, meaning “mother's womb”. Translators render _rachamim_ “tender, responsive, compassionate love/mercy”, “womb love” like that of a mother responding in love to a child of her womb. _Rachamim_ denotes a deep concern and empathy for the sufferings of others. In some contexts, it appears in conjunction with _hesed_ and indicates “tender mercy”, “compassionate love”, or “tender pity”. _Rachamim_ has a different nuance from _hesed_ as it denotes the love of a mother that binds her to her child forever. Thus, _rachamim_ denotes a completely gratuitous, unconditional merciful love that we cannot explain rationally. Old Testament texts attribute these qualities to God as in Isaiah 49:15 “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you”. Old Testament writers express this faithful, indestructible love, as God’s faithfulness in the face of human failure and unfaithfulness; as forgiveness of the sins of individuals and of whole communities and in God’s readiness to honour the covenant promises, in spite of human infidelity. Hosea 14:4 emphasizes this belief, “I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel”.

Like _hesed, rachamim_ consistently has the meaning of showing mercy, compassion, or pity and like _hesed_ describes a variety of human relationships. Related to _rechem_ the word for “womb”, it has the connotation of a mother's affection for her child or of the bond between siblings. We find this sense of a mother's compassion for her child in 1 Kings 3:26, and a similar expression describes Joseph’s feelings for his brother in Genesis 43:30. Likewise, God’s mercy is often likened to family relationships, as that of a father for his children in Jeremiah 31:20; Psalm 103:13; and Isaiah 63:15-16; a husband’s loyalty to his wife in Isaiah 54:6-8; and Hosea 2:19, a brother for a brother in Amos 1:11, and as a mother toward a nursing child in Isaiah 49:15. Old
Testament writers also use rachamim to describe human mercy or its absence. Many texts describe Israel's enemies as merciless as we see in Isaiah 13:18; 47:6; Jeremiah 6:23; 21:7; 50:42. In legal contexts, Israel shows no mercy to criminals according to Deuteronomy 13:8-21. On the other hand, God expected the Israelites to be merciful to their neighbours in 1 Kings 8:31:32; and Proverbs 3:29; 21:13. God particularly demanded that the Israelites extend mercy toward the poor and needy in Zechariah 7:9-10. David, when he fled from Saul hid in the cave, prays “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by” (Psa 57:1).

Three less frequently used terms that are translated as “mercy” in the Old Testament are: (1) hanan, which incorporates notions of “mercy” as gracious, generous, compassionate, caring, and forgiving; (2) hamal, which literally means to spare someone who should be punished in the sense of not insisting on a punishment that fits the crime, but rather showing mercy and compassion by extending forgiveness and remission of guilt; (3) hus, which denotes 'pity' and 'compassion'.

Mercy in the New Testament

New Testament writers use the Greek eleos, splagchna, and oiktirmos to translate both hesed and rachamim. Of these words, they use eleos most frequently. Interestingly non-biblical Greek writers often view this word as suggesting an over-romantic tendency to softness or leniency, but New Testament writers do not adhere to this perception. They generally uphold the Old Testament perspective on God's mercy. This Greek comes from a word that denotes “oil poured out”. When we sing the Kyrie eleison, we are asking that God pour out God's merciful love on us. The Greek translation does not capture the wealth of distinctions evident in the Hebrew original, and does not offer all the semantic nuances proper to the original text. On the other hand, the New Testament builds upon the wealth and depth that already marks the Old Testament. Thus, we have inherited a wealth of expressions that portray God's mercy in strikingly human terms.

A unique example of this portrayal of God’s mercy appears in chapter one of Luke’s Gospel. Luke launches his gospel narrative with each of the main characters proclaiming and celebrating God’s mercy. They each evoke the Old Testament tradition of a merciful God. Mary, like Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10), sings a song of praise (The Magnificat) in which she recalls God’s merciful actions to the Israelites through their history. “God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. It may be helpful to note here how John Paul II elaborated In Dives in Misericordia note 61, on how he understood ‘mercy’.

He wrote: Cf. Lk. 1:72. Here too it is a case of mercy in the meaning of hesed, insofar as in the following sentences, in which Zechariah speaks of the “tender mercy of our God,” there is clearly expressed the second meaning, namely, rahamim (Latin translation: viscera
misericordiae), which rather identifies God’s mercy with a mother’s love. Note 62, Cf. Lk. 15:14-32.

God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy” (Luke 1:50). John the Baptist’s birth is witness to God’s mercy to his mother Elizabeth (Luke 1:58), and his father Zechariah’s canticle attests to God’s covenant, the hallmark of God’s faithful and forgiving relationship with human beings. “God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered God’s holy covenant. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us” (Luke 1:72). So we see that Mary, Jesus, John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah all share in God’s mercy, that is, the unbroken covenant that links God’s actions in the Old Testament with God’s actions in the New Testament. Luke 1:58-78 describes how John the Baptist’s birth and Jesus’ birth both testify to God’s mercy and God’s faithfulness to God’s promises throughout history. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each present unique accounts of how Jesus embodies God’s mercy in his life, his teaching and his miracles.

Each of the four Gospels portrays Jesus as teaching and revealing a merciful, forgiving, inclusive God. Jesus as a human being lives according to the teachings of the Old Testament. He embodies that Good News in his very person and behaviour (Luke 4). Throughout his life, he exemplifies the mercy of God so richly portrayed in the Old Testament. Descriptions of Jesus’ actions reflect the theme of God’s mercy as hesed, rachamim, and hanan. We find these qualities portrayed in a variety of contexts through Jesus ministry. He meets people who ask for mercy, for example, the two blind men in Matt 9:27; a woman with a possessed daughter in Matt 15:22; the father of an epileptic boy in Matt 17:15; ten lepers in Luke 17:13; and in Mark 5:19 we hear Jesus instruct a grateful recipient of his healing mercy who wants to join him being counselled to ‘Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you’. Paul eloquently highlights God’s mercy in his own life in 1 Corinthians 7:25; 2 Corinthians 4:1, and Timothy 1:13-16.

Jesus willingness to forgive demonstrates vividly the Old Testament teaching about God’s mercy expressed in willingness to forgive. New Testament texts indicate that Jesus ties his teaching about prayer to his teaching about forgiveness. Some examples are: Matt 6:14:15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25:26; Luke 17:3-4; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13. Jesus above all teaches forgiveness and mercy by his example as we read in “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do (Luke 23:34). In calling upon God to forgive, Jesus shows his willingness to forgive. Stephen prays as he is dying at the hands of his killers “Lord, do not charge them with this sin (Acts 7:60). Forgive others is not natural to human beings as the poet Alexander Pope so aptly states in his aphorism: "To err is human, to forgive divine" (Alexander Pope).5

Mercy demands that we forgive others as we read in Matt 6:14-15 18:35; James 2:13; Vengeance belongs to God, not to us; we must show mercy, Rom 12:19-21; Sins against us pale in comparison to our sins against God (Matt 18:23-34; Mark 11:25-26;
Luke 17:3-4; 23:32; Acts 2:38; Rom 13:8; Eph 4:32; 5:1-2; James 4:11-12;
Ephesians 2:4-5 says that God's mercy delivers sinners from the death of sin into life.
In Christ, the mercy of God brings new life in 1 Peter 1:3, and undergirds the hope of
life to come in Jude 1:21. Hebrews 4:16 teaches that the mercy of God is available
for all who ask for it. Christians live with the assurance of God's mercy and must be
consistent in sharing that good news with others. Those who experience God's mercy are themselves to be merciful. God desires that we extend mercy to others, particularly those who lack what we call the necessities of life, as we read in Matt 9:13; 12:7; 23:23. Those who show no mercy to others cannot expect God's mercy themselves, Matt 18:33-34; James 2:13. Mercy is a mark of discipleship in Matt 5:7 and disciples show mercy to neighbours in Luke 10:36-37; Rom 12:8; and in James 3:17 where we read “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

The Greek splagchna is similar in meaning to the Hebrew rachamim. The word denotes strongly felt emotions, principally compassion and love. Some examples appear in Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32, in Jesus' compassion for the crowds; in Matt 20:34 where Jesus shows pity for the blind; in Mark 1:41 when he has compassion for a leper; in Mark 9:20-27 in his mercy towards or a possessed child; and in Luke 7:13 where Jesus has compassion for a widow. Jesus uses the term in Matt 18:27 to describe a master's forgiveness of a servant's debt; Luke 15:20 to describe a father's forgiveness for his wayward, spendthrift son; Luke 10 describes a Samaritan's pity for a wounded Jew at the side of the Jericho road. Paul uses this word to plead with the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:12) to revitalize their love for him; and to exhort the Philippians to care for one another (Phil 2:1-2).

Oiktirmos meaning 'pity', 'mercy', and 'compassion' appears throughout the New Testament. We find it combined with splagchna in Colossians 3:12; Philippians 2:1, and James 5:11. In Hebrews 10:28 it denotes the justice of the Law. Paul describes God as “the father of mercies” in 2 Corinthians 1:3, and he appeals to the Romans to emulate God's mercy in 2 Corinthians 12:1. Luke 6:36 says that Christian mercy must be rooted in God's mercy,

As in the Old Testament, the New Testament does not separate God's mercy, God's love, God's grace, or God's faithfulness, for these are like threads woven into the
tapestry that is God. New Testament writers recognize Jesus Christ as the
embodiment of the mercy of God. They portray him as the definitive revelation of
God's mercy, the pledge of that mercy for all believers, and the fountain of mercy
expressed in all human relationships.

Jesus spent his life relieving suffering, welcoming outsiders, and sinners, and
comforting the grieving. He expressed the mercy of God when he preached to the
poor, offered freedom to the oppressed, gave sight to the blind, and assured his
listeners of God's care for them “not a hair of your head will perish” (Luke 21:18).
It is not surprising that throughout Jesus’ public ministry he engaged in physical expressions of mercy, pity, compassion, and healing. The Gospels tell us about his responses to the poor and oppressed widows and single women, social outcasts, sinners, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the sick in mind or body, the hungry, his reluctant and wayward disciples with their doubts and ambitions. We see that Jesus responded to people’s needs in very practical ways, for example, Matt 9:27-31 tells how Jesus restored their sight to the two blind men who cry, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” They went away and spread the good news about him throughout that district. Their experience of Jesus’ mercy propelled them into becoming his disciples. Mark 6:34-44 and Matt 15:32-39 describes how Jesus feeds five thousand people in a desert because he had compassion on the crowds who followed him. Mark 8:1-10 describes how Jesus feeds four thousand people by the lake, because he had compassion on the people who had been with him for three days.

Mercy as portrayed in the many texts outlined above reaches every form of human need. Those who experience true mercy do not feel humiliated, but come to realise that they are people of value and dignity. All who extend a welcome to those who have lost hope, who lack corporal and spiritual resources, who seek unconditional love, forgiveness; healing and justice must be willing to follow the teaching of Jesus regardless of the cost. Mercy is the concrete expression of the presence of the love, forgiveness and mercy of God in the world. Sisters of Mercy, Mercy Companions, Mercy Associates, and all who follow the mercy charism, must not only look penetratingly and compassionately at moral, physical, and material injustice and need, people experience today in our society, but must seek to exemplify mercy and compassion as we seek to address injustice and need. Jesus’ disciples and followers understood and practiced mercy in this way. Mercy never ceases to reveal itself in the actions of those who are true followers of the merciful Christ and is a unique expression of the love lived by Jesus in his life and in his death. Thus, his life and death exemplify how mercy and hope endure.


2 The word for love in Hebrew is “ahab”. The New Testament writers rendered it as “agape”.


4 Latin translations of the Old Testament render hesed, rachamim and eleos as Misericordia, which literally means a “miserable heart”
Alexander Pope (1688-1744) wrote this brilliant couplet in *Essay on Criticism* (1711). He developed it from the Latin expression, “Errare humanum es.” He added, “To forgive, divine” to this old saying, and thus created a memorable couplet.

---

5 Alexander Pope (1688-1744) wrote this brilliant couplet in *Essay on Criticism* (1711). He developed it from the Latin expression, “Errare humanum es.” He added, “To forgive, divine” to this old saying, and thus created a memorable couplet.