I want to start with two stories.

Andrew Chan was 21 years old when he organised a group of eight young Australians to travel to Bali, Indonesia, in order to bring more than 8 kilograms of heroin back to Australia. Chan and his eight partners in crime were arrested, and both he and the other ringleader of the group, Myuran Sukumaran, were sentenced to death by an Indonesian court in 2006. They spent 10 years on death row in a Balinese jail. In that time, Chan became a Christian and went on to be the pastor of the prison church, completing a degree in theology. He appealed against the death penalty and the governor of the prison argued that he should be spared because of the positive influence he had had on the other prisoners. His supporters campaigned for his release using the Twitter hashtag #istandformercy. Others argued he committed a crime, he knew what the laws were, he should face the consequences.

Yakub Memon was 31 years old when he allegedly assisted his brother to plan and carry out the 1993 Bombay Bombings, a series of 13 coordinated explosions that killed 350 people and injured 1,200. He was executed the day before yesterday. His opponents took to Twitter with the hashtag #nomercy.

I wonder how you feel about those two stories. There are some situations that make us cry out for mercy, and others that make us cry out for judgment and vengeance. And of course it's not just situations involving other people, and it's just not murders or war crimes where we face this tension. Just about every day we have to deal with situations where we are wronged by others, or when we wrong them. How do you feel when someone wrongs you? Do you find your blood boiling? Do you feel the need to lash out in retaliation? Are you pleased when you see someone being punished for something you think was wrong? And how about when you are in the wrong? Do you happily accept the consequences, or do you find yourself longing for mercy and forgiveness.

I had a personal, if somewhat trivial, example of this a few weeks ago, when I drove up a road that had a sign saying it was closed to traffic except for residents. The sign was perfectly visible, I just wasn't paying attention, and sure enough there was a policeman waiting there who pulled me over and gave me a 100-franc reason not to drive on that road again. I tried to argue that I hadn't seen the sign, and that I lived very close, that I wouldn't do it again -- I wanted mercy. But unfortunately the policeman had a job to do, and the reality was I was completely in the wrong.

And what we realise pretty quickly when we start talking about mercy is that we can't do that without talking about wrongdoing and justice. I wanted mercy was because I had done something wrong and was being punished for it. Mercy and justice go together. And in fact that's exactly what we see when we turn to the Bible. So that's my first point today: Mercy is the pattern of the Bible.

God's mercy is a thread that runs right through the Bible, virtually from its first page to its last. Mercy is part of the recurring pattern of how God interacts with his people. And the recurring pattern we see again and again throughout the Bible is this: people rebel against God; God judges them; God provides a way out of his judgment. Human rebellion, divine judgment, divine mercy.

The first instance of this is in Genesis 6, where God says humankind has become so wicked, so evil that he plans to destroy them with a flood. But he provides a way out: the ark on which Noah and his family escape. Human rebellion; divine judgement; divine mercy.

And the first time God is described as merciful comes, you might be surprised to hear, in Genesis 19, in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, a story more commonly associated with God's wrath and anger. Again, because of human rebellion, God is preparing to bring judgment on the city of Sodom and Gomorrah. But he sends two angels to rescue Lot and his family. In the end the angels literally have to drag Lot away from the city: **15** As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city." **16** But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, *the LORD being merciful to him*, and they brought him out and set him outside the city. Human rebellion; divine judgement; divine mercy.

We see the same pattern again on a grander scale in the Exodus. Pharaoh rebels against God by rejecting his word to let the people of Israel go, so God sends a series of plagues on Egypt, culminating in the angel of death that takes away the life of the firstborn child from every family. It's a horrific act of judgment. But he provides a way out: the blood of the lamb painted on the doorposts of each Jewish house, so that when the angel of death comes to that house and sees the blood of the lamb, he passes over and leaves the family untouched. Human rebellion; divine judgment; divine mercy.

The pattern continues after the people leave Egypt and go into the wilderness, where they eventually set up camp at Mt Sinai. And Moses goes up the mountain to meet with God, and to receive the 10 commandments. While he's up there of course the people get sick of waiting for him so they ask his brother Aaron to make gods for them. So Aaron makes a golden calf, and the people start worshiping it. Up on the mountain God says to Moses in Exodus 33: "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves… Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you… **11** But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people... **14** *And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.* Human rebellion, divine judgment, divine mercy.

Then in the same chapter we have God describing himself for the first time as a God of mercy.

Moses goes back down the mountain, sees the people worshiping the golden calf, and in his own anger throws down the stone tablets with the 10 commandments, and smashes them, so that he then has to go back up the mountain to get a new copy. And as he stands there for the second time, he has this amazing experience. Exodus 33:

18 Moses said, "Please show me your glory." **19** And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and *will show mercy on whom I will show mercy*.

Then just a few verses later, in Exodus 34, in the moment when God passes before Moses we read this:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, *a God merciful and gracious*, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, **7** keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,

Mercy is part of who God is. It's part of his own self-definition. It's part of his identity, integral to his very nature. But I hope you also realise that his mercy only makes sense in the context of his justice, his judgment. Now Tom will be preaching on God's judgment and wrath in a few weeks, so I'm not going to go into depth on that now, but as we think about God's mercy, we need to realise what it is that God is showing us mercy from – *he is sparing us from his judgment*. In fact God goes on to say to Moses in Exodus 34: but who will by no means clear the guilty.

God's justice is as much a part of his character as his mercy. In fact he cannot be a God of mercy unless he is a first a God of justice. If a judge in a court of law acquits a person, or passes a more lenient sentence, we can only say it's merciful because it could have been much worse; we know the judge could have been within their rights to convict that person, or to pass a much more severe sentence. In the same way, God is within his rights to pass judgment on us because even though he created us and has loved us with an everlasting love, we reject him and his authority over our lives.

We may not like talking about God's judgment. We may prefer talking about his love. But if you do not have a robust understanding of God's judgment you cannot truly appreciate his love or his mercy. You make God a caricature, a figment of your own imagination; you turn him into Santa Claus if you strip him of his justice.

And we cannot understand his judgment or his mercy until we confront and acknowledge our own sin. You and I are rebels – we're all in rebellion against God's authority over our lives. Not just in the wrong things we do, the individual sins, but in the way we exclude God from our lives and tell him we know best how to run our lives and order or world. And look where that's got us.

And of course the ultimate example of God's mercy is in Jesus' death for us on the cross. God the infinite, immortal creator becomes a finite and mortal part of his creation, is falsely accused, beaten, mocked, spat upon, abandoned by his friends, abandoned by God himself, and executed, dying a slow, painful and humiliating death. And why does he do it? The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to Titus 3:5: He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.

He does it so as to take on himself the judgment of God for *our* rebellion. God doesn't reduce the sentence; he carries it out on himself. It's the most inconceivable act of mercy. God's judgment and mercy meet on the cross, in the death of Jesus. John Stott, the great English preacher and author who died just a couple of years ago, says: "The symbol of the religion of Jesus is the cross, not the scales."

So the question is, how do you receive God's mercy? Well the first thing we need to understand is that it's not something we can earn. We know that from our own experience, right? When we are in a position of needing mercy, it's because we have done something wrong and are destiny is in someone else's hands. It's up to them whether to show us mercy or not. And so it is with God. As he says in Exodus: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and *will show mercy on whom I will*

show mercy. God's mercy is God's to give. We can't earn it, and we can't compel him to give it to us. He chooses who he will show his mercy to.

And we see this idea repeated in the New Testament. In fact Paul quotes Exodus in his letter to the church in Rome.

For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." **16** So then it depends not on human will or exertion,[b] but on God, who has mercy.

Our only role is to acknowledge our need of God's mercy. Just as a criminal will enter a guilty plea in the hope of getting a reduced sentence, so our only hope is to plead guilty before God, to come to him in repentance, acknowledging that we are sinful and broken and he is holy and pure. As long as we thumb our noses at God and tell him we don't need him, we remain liable for our rejection of him, and we remain in danger of facing his judgement. But when we come to him, acknowledging that we've made a mess of our lives, admitting that we're not perfect, we can have a certain hope of receiving his mercy, because we know that's what he's like. He's not mean or capricious. He is the Lord, merciful and gracious.

It stands to reason that having received such extravagant mercy, we are to be givers of mercy; we are to be channels of God's mercy to the world. So that's my second point: Mercy is to be the pattern of our lives.

One of the things we know even from our own experience and that we discover in the Bible is that while we want God to be merciful to us, we don't always want him to be merciful to others. We want our sins forgiven, but not those of others. Perhaps the best example of this is in the book of Jonah, where God sends Jonah to Nineveh to tell the Ninevites to turn back from their rebellion, because if they don't, God's judgment is coming upon them. Once again, rebellion, judgment, but mercy in the shape of Jonah warning them to turn back to God.

Jonah doesn't want to go, and to be fair to Jonah, we have to remember that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians had a reputation for being brutal and ruthless. I guess it would be something like God asking you to go to modern Syria and preach to the Islamic State, and tell them to repent. We can perhaps understand why Jonah might have had certain reservations about this mission. But of course ends up being personally delivered there, goes to Nineveh and of course the Ninevites *do* repent and that makes Jonah cross.

Jonah 3:10 **10** When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. **2** And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

Jonah quotes Exodus 34 right back at him and says, see, I knew you would do this. You're so infuriating. These Ninevites don't deserve your mercy. They deserve your vengeance. They deserve the Sodom and Gomorrah treatment. Rain down fire and brimstone! If Jonah had been on Twitter he would have tweeted @Nineveh #nomercy.

But God will have mercy on whomever he wills, even repentant Ninevites. As I said earlier, if we make the mistake of only talking about God's love without ever mentioning his judgment, we end up with a woolly, fluffy Christianity that fails to deal with questions of evil and justice. But on the other, we can also fall into self-righteous Christianity where we see ourselves as better than others who are not deserving of God's mercy. Or we start wishing for God's judgment on them. But of course, we fail to remember that we are not deserving of God's mercy either!

But if God has lavished his mercy on us, who are we to say who else he can and can't lavish it on? Jesus himself has plenty to say on this topic. Here are just a few:

Luke 6:36 Be merciful, just as your father is merciful.

Matthew 5:7: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Matthew 9:13: Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

But perhaps the best passage to look at is in Matthew 18, where Jesus tells the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant.

21 Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive
him? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-
seven times.

23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with
his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten
thousand talents. 25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife
and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees,
imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the
master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went
out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began
to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him,
'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he
should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly
distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master
summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you
pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on
you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also
my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

If we cannot forgive each other, it's a sign that we ourselves have not accepted the offer of God's mercy. Because Jesus has shown us such incredible mercy, we are to be people who show mercy to others. If he has not held our sins against us, how can we hold grudges against each other? What does that look like? First of all, we are to be slow to anger and quick to show compassion. Whether in relationships at home or at work or school, or just in our interactions with strangers, when we are wronged, we have to resist the temptation to lash out, to get even. We don't return insults for

insults; we don't return violence with violence, we don't return betrayal with betrayal, we don't return gossip with gossip, and so on. Instead we return all evil with love, kindness, patience, gentleness and mercy.

That doesn't necessarily mean that we're doormats for everyone to walk over; on the contrary it takes strength and courage to resist the urge to strike back. But not striking back might mean in some situations that we are willing to be losers in order that we might follow Jesus in showing mercy. In some situations we might forego our "rights". After all, wasn't Jesus a loser? Didn't he forego all his rights for us?

I also think that mercy means we're to show compassion towards people who are weak and vulnerable. The poor, the homeless, the elderly, people with disabilities, people with mental health problems, people with addiction problems, asylum seekers, prisoners, beggars and so on. Our world seems to take a view that people in these kinds of situations have mostly brought it upon themselves. If you just work hard you can sort yourself out. People who are poor are lazy. Asylum seekers are parasites. People with addictions have made their own bed. If you're in prison it's because you deserve to be. I put it to you that none of those are merciful responses, and therefore none of them are Christian responses. Because at the end of the day, we are all poor before God, we are all weak and broken, we are all beggars at his gates in need of his mercy and compassion.

James 2:13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

I started by telling you about Andrew Chan, the drug smuggler turned pastor. As you may know, Chan was executed by firing squad in April of this year. He had no mercy from the Indonesian government, but he knew a better mercy, the mercy of God in Jesus who was also executed, but who rose again, dealing once and for all with God's judgment on our behalf. In the final moments of his life Andrew Chan and the seven other prisoners executed alongside him sang Matt Redman's song Ten Thousand Reasons before gunfire silenced them. We're going to sing that song to finish in a few minutes, and I just wanted to draw your attention to these lyrics.

You're rich in love
And You're slow to anger
Your name is great
And Your heart is kind
For all Your goodness
I will keep on singing
Ten thousand reasons
For my heart to find.