

Along the track

Year of Mercy I

The Year of Mercy is an extraordinary gift, and an extraordinary challenge. In summoning the Church to a Year of Mercy, Pope Francis is calling on each of us to become a living sign of compassionate love.

The world we live in is sorely in need of compassion, love and mercy. We witness daily in our press stories of incredible violence, revenge and cruelty. Indifference to the suffering of others is often staggering, with hardly a whimper raised about the hundreds of refugees across the world who are losing their lives in incredibly harrowing circumstances, or the plight of those who are starving, just holding onto life. The precious gift of life itself seems to have become pretty cheap.

There are those closer to home, the victims of sexual abuse, of domestic violence, of poverty and exclusion, those who endure the scourge of depression and loneliness, those who simply can't find work.

All that can be quite overwhelming. We can all give in to the thought, what on earth can I do? The Year of Mercy could be a circuit breaker. We may not be able to stop all the suffering and injustice, the tragedies that occur, but we can make a difference. Mercy starts with the individual, with each of us. It is too easy to say that 'they' should do something about this or that - 'they' won't do anything unless we do.

Each of us is asked to become the bearers of God's love to our world. That love knows no limits. God's mercy is available to everyone. Pope Francis writes in his apostolic letter *Evangelii Gaudium*, God's love must be freely given, in a climate in which 'everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged'. Now that's a challenge!

What's that got to do with violence, terrorism, pain and suffering. Trying to do something about all that starts at home, it starts with each individual. If, at the end of this Jubilee Year of Mercy, each of us is not changed in some way, it will not have been the success the Pope dreams of. Perhaps Pope Francis' most famous utterance to date has been 'Who am I to judge?' It reflects the priority he gives to mercy as the hallmark of his papacy. It is a challenge to us too. Mercy isn't just about forgiving, it isn't just about being kind to those we may think, in normal circumstances, wouldn't deserve our largesse or support.

Sometimes we want to make judgments about who is eligible for God's love and who is not, who should be forgiven or not. That is not up to us. That's God's job. In Pope Francis' words: I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else - God is in this person's life. You can - you must - try to seek God in every human life. That does call on us to reach out to others in our own communities so that everyone can feel 'welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged'.

A couple of weeks ago I was out walking when a young woman approached me. She was a mess, to say the least. I saw her coming and was tempted to cross over to the other side of the street. She was in tears and said to me: "Can you help me. I feel my life collapsing around me. I don't know what to do. I can't go back home". I had no idea what to do. Another person was passing and I asked her to help me "She's on ice, you know", she said and walked off. Two others had similar reactions. To my shame, after ten years of living in this community I had no idea what to do, who to call in such a situation, where to go to get immediate help. I asked her to wait while I made a call (thank God for mobiles) and my wife and daughter came to help. Those words 'welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged' cut pretty deep. Did I respond with any of those?

Who do we welcome into our lives? My son lives in Redfern in Sydney. It is a great place to walk around - interesting old buildings, community gardens etc. An old chap asked me to loan him a couple of bucks on one of my walks. 'I'll pay you back tomorrow', he said. 'How do you know I'll be here tomorrow?' I asked him. 'Well, you were here yesterday so I guess you'll be here tomorrow', he said. And there he was tomorrow with my couple of bucks! He was (and is) a very interesting person. I had made judgments about what he'd do with the money and whether he was worthy of my generosity but he was the one who welcomed me into his life.

Little, insignificant examples perhaps but every journey starts with the first step. If we are to make the Year of Mercy a reality, we all have to take at least one step, a step to become a bearer of God's compassionate love. It is not that we don't show that in some way already but we are asked to go out of our comfort zone to welcome 'the stranger', to show love where it is most needed, to ask ourselves 'who am I to judge?', to forgive and not count the cost, to be less critical and judgmental and instead go out of our way to give encouragement and support to others in some way. What a great year it could be!!

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au