

Along the track

Year of Mercy II

So how is the Jubilee of Mercy going for you? In your home, your parish, your school, your organisation, your workplace? Are people feeling more welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged? How are we reaching out to all those who, in Pope Francis' words, need a sign of tenderness? That echoes the words of the Prophet Micah: 'And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, to love mercy (sometimes translated as to love tenderly) and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).'

Tenderly isn't a word much used today. It seems to have lost its currency, yet it is a very powerful concept. Loving tenderly is more than just tending to the needs of others, however important that may be. It is an outward expression of an attitude of gentleness, kindness, and particularly a sensitivity to their needs and situation. We see it in the way someone cares for a dying person perhaps, the way an elderly couple may care for each other, a mother with her new-born. Is that how God loves us? Does God love us tenderly?

God revealed God's name to Abraham and to Moses as 'I am.' The biblical understanding of this is 'I am with you. I am for you. I am walking with you, accompanying you.' We first meet 'God who walks with us' in the Garden of Eden when he comes to walk in the cool of the evening with Adam and Eve, as God usually did (Genesis 3:8). God accompanies the people of Israel in good times and in bad, guiding them, caring for them, feeding them with manna in the wilderness, showing them the way with the pillar of cloud, despite their recalcitrance. The prophet Hosea describes God in this way:

I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them (Hos 11.14).

The God who walks with them (and us), who holds us to the cheek is not an angry God, exacting punishment and retribution but 'the LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6).'

Some find that hard to accept, especially those of my generation who were perhaps brought up with a very exacting God, totalling up faults on the ledger. It can be a challenge to come to terms with 'the invisible God, who from the fullness of love, addresses us as friends, and moves among us, in order to invite and receive us into God's own company (CCC #142).'

Mercy, tenderness is more than just a feeling – it is very practical. So who in our family, in our community, in our world is in need of some tenderness? The timeless parable of the Good Samaritan may give us a clue. A traveller is robbed, stripped of clothing, beaten, and

left half dead along the road. First a priest and then a Levite come by, but both avoid the man. Finally, a Samaritan comes by. Samaritans and Jews generally despised each other, but the Samaritan helps the injured man. Jesus tells this parable in response to a question 'Who is my neighbour?' The Samaritan is an outsider, despised. Yet he reaches out to the injured person. He bent down in the dirt and helped this man. He binds the wounds, finds shelter, pays for it and offers to come back and pay other expenses incurred. And he is a despised stranger! That's tender mercy in action.

Mercy calls us to an open mind and the open heart. It calls us, at times, out of our comfort zones – in fact it calls us to expand our comfort zones, to an acceptance of difference. It calls us to a commitment to 'strangers.' It calls us to ask the question 'who have I welcomed lately?'

Jesus is the image of this God of tenderness. We, as his disciples, are asked to be such a living image for our world. Christian discipleship is very challenging at times. It is about living in this world the way that Jesus the Christ lived in his—touching lepers, spending time with the outcaste, inviting those not regarded as 'the right people' into his company. He went out of his way to show that kindness and generosity to everyone is always needed. To him, those who were different, those who were regarded as 'unclean', those who were regarded as 'not acceptable', were still deserving of his love. This Year of Mercy is a reminder that we are called on to be for our own world what Jesus was for his. Who are those in need of tender mercy in our world?

If we are to reflect on ourselves as followers of Christ, perhaps the best starting point is through the eyes of strangers. How do they see us, how do they see us meeting the needs of the people who present themselves to us? If we are to reflect on ourselves as Christians and as a Christian community we might start by asking who are in need of healing, freedom, love and tenderness and asking how we can reach them, how have we reached out to them? Then we might ask how we can best support each other in doing that.

The Jubilee Year asks us to get involved, in the Pope's words, 'to never tire of extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort.' We are asked to walk humbly with God who accompanies us through life, by also acting justly, loving tenderly, loving mercy, as God does.

Regards
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