

The Year of Mercy

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath¹

Pope Francis may not have had Portia's words from "The Merchant of Venice" at the forefront of his mind when he declared this year to be the Year of Mercy but, as so often, Shakespeare provides les mots justes to encapsulate its essence. That the Year of Mercy coincides with the 400th Anniversary of Shakespeare's death is serendipitous. We know well enough that Shakespeare is a pretty good dramatist but he is also a pretty good theologian. There is some scholarly debate about whether or not Shakespeare was a secret recusant. Whether he was or not, the theology of his plays is invariably a model of Catholic orthodoxy. Shakespeare, through Portia goes on to say that "mercy is above [the] sceptered sway of kings

It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
.... in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
and that same prayer doth teach us all to render
the deeds of mercy."

Mercy is an attribute of God. His mercy never fades, "is for ever sure."² The Psalmist reminds us that "His love endures for ever."³ Although Christ's sacrifice was made at a moment in history on Calvary, it was a sacrifice for all time and for all people. His mercy lasts

¹ The Merchant of Venice, 4.1.188-191.
² Psalm 136: 1. All people that on earth do dwell.

forever. It is tireless and its stream never dries up. It is where we find strength and hope in moments of trial and weakness because we can be sure and certain that God will never abandon us.

Our responsibility is to acknowledge that we are in need of God's mercy. It is the first step of the Christian life. We must be aware of our need for forgiveness and reconciliation when we have fallen away into error and sin. S. Paul's advice to the Corinthians was "be reconciled to God"⁴ and that exhortation was born of his understanding that Christ, from his encounters throughout his earthly ministry, knew at first-hand human frailty and weakness, and the human need to be loved. However, it requires a conscious and articulated human response and recognition of that need. It requires us to walk through the open door of God's love. There is always the temptation to lock the doors, to live with our sin, justifying it to ourselves, shutting ourselves off from God's mercy and forgiveness. Our shame at some of our actions and attitudes keeps those protective doors closed. Fortunate the man or woman who can come to the end of his or her life without something of which they are ashamed. We need to unlock our hearts and walk through the open door to God's mercy.

Not only are we in need of God's mercy, it is our Christian duty to show mercy. Pope S. John Paul II wrote that "Jesus Christ taught that man not only receives and experiences the mercy of God but that he is also called to practice mercy."⁵ Traditionally that is accomplished through the Corporal Works of Mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, bury the dead, shelter the traveller, comfort the sick, free the captive.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 5: 20 [1980] Papal Encyclical
Dives in misericordia

These underpin the many and varied practical and financial charitable acts we undertake. There are also Spiritual Works of Mercy that are an obligation of our Christian witness: instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubting, admonish the transgressor, bear wrongs with patience and fortitude, forgive offences willingly. comfort those afflicted, pray for the living and for the dead. Both the Corporal and the Spiritual Works of Mercy should be so woven into the fabric of our lives that they are done as a matter of course, unostentatiously and without thought of reward, other than knowing that we are about Christ's work. But it is good to remind ourselves and consciously refresh what it is that we do and why we do it.

We have an advantage here. We are under the patronage of Our Lady. She plays a significant part in our devotions and our prayers and in the liturgical life here. Later in this Mass Fr Neil will inaugurate a new Cell of Our Lady of Walsingham as a further expression of her role in salvation and our life here. We greet her in the Anthem *Salve, Regina, Mater Misericordiae* : Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy. As God in Christ is the well-spring of all mercy, so Our Lady, owing to her unique position in the scheme of salvation, is the Mediatrix of Mercy. Mary is the Mother of God, the God who forgives, the God whose power of love and forgiveness is inexhaustible. At the foot of the Cross she heard her Son and her Lord say, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”⁶ For us, Mary is an icon of how the Church, and we as members of that Church, must offer forgiveness and love to those who seek it. She teaches us that the forgiveness granted on Calvary knows no boundaries or limits. “Neither the law with its quibbles, nor the wisdom of this world with its

⁶ S. Luke 23: 24

distractions, can hold us back. The Church's forgiveness [and mercy] must be every bit as broad as that offered by Jesus on the Cross and by Mary at his feet. There is no other way. It is for this purpose that the Holy Spirit made the Apostles the effective ministers of forgiveness, so what was obtained by the death of Jesus may reach all men and women in every age."⁷

Pope Francis spoke those words when he opened the Jubilee Door of Mercy in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Catholic Cathedrals, Basilicas and churches, and others in ecumenical solidarity, have a Door of Mercy through whose open doors can pass all those who seek God's mercy and forgiveness. Santa Maria Maggiore is the S. Mary, Bourne Street of Rome, its premier Marian church, and we too have a Door of Mercy. We came though it this morning when we arrived for Mass. We come through it every time we enter this church. And we come through it because we know that we are in need of God's mercy and forgiveness, and of his love, and that we will find it here in the Sacraments of his love in the confessional and on the altar.

It is fitting that in this place dedicated to her honour we invoke the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy. She is the Mother of Mercy because she bore in her womb the Prince of Peace, God made incarnate for our salvation. She bore the Divine Mercy. We have crossed the threshold of the Door of Mercy conscious that Our Lady prays for us and asks God mercy for us, conscious of our need for mercy, conscious that we will find them here, noblest in the sacraments we celebrate in this place this day. How then can we ever be afraid?

⁷ Pope Francis: Sermon on the opening of the Jubilee Holy Door of Mercy in S. Maria Maggiore, Rome

S. Mary the Virgin, Bourne Street 2016