

# Daily Reflections for Advent 2015

## Entering into The Year of Mercy

Fr Peter Newsam



“Mercy is an indispensable dimension of love; it is, as it were, love’s second name”

St John Paul II

Pope Francis has summoned the Church to celebrate together an extraordinary Jubilee Year, the 'Jubilee of Mercy', beginning on December 8<sup>th</sup>. I thought that it might be helpful for us to reflect together this Advent on the meaning and place of mercy in our lives, and that is the purpose of the daily reflections that follow. They fall into two parts: for the days before December 8<sup>th</sup>, there are some thoughts on mercy in general (mostly my own, but with a couple of passages borrowed from others); for the days following December 8<sup>th</sup> there are some reflections on the works of mercy. Pope Francis has said: 'It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy' (*Misericordiae Vultus* 15). If that is the Holy Father's burning desire, we had better respond!

I hope you will not find that I have laboured the point in these two dozen or more reflections on mercy. As we begin a whole year dedicated to mercy I think it might be helpful to imagine mercy as a beautiful and complex treasure, a work of art that we pick up each day, twisting and turning it in our fingers to look at it again and again, from every different angle and in every different light. It will look different in the bright light of summer from how it looks in the dull light of these winter days, and that is why the Holy Father has given us a whole year to consider it. Mercy is a great mystery, and a year will not be long enough!

*"You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the appalling... strangeness of the mercy of God"*

Graham Greene, Brighton Rock

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> November

*Misericordia*

What is mercy? Pope Francis explains that through his mercy God reveals his love for us to be that of a father or a mother 'moved to the very depths out of love for their child' (MV 6). He goes on to refer to the compassion of Christ, who reads the hearts of those he encounters, and responds to their deepest needs (MV 8). Mercy is where a person's deepest being is moved, disturbed, by the need they see in another. The Latin word 'misericordia', which we translate as 'mercy', comes from 'miserum cor' or sorrowful heart. Seeing the unhappiness, the suffering, the incompleteness and lack of fulfillment of another, my heart hurts. St Augustine describes mercy as a heartfelt distress for the suffering of another, that drives us to help him if we can.

Mercy requires us to have some spiritual insight, that enables us to see the needs of others; it also requires us to have fragile, vulnerable hearts. Our culture often encourages us to do the reverse, to have hard and well-defended hearts, to be strong and self-sufficient. This is something that we need to overcome. We are so touched when we hear of Jesus being moved with compassion; how beautiful it is when he looks at us, sees our incompleteness, and is moved with mercy; how beautiful it is for those around us when we do the same.

*'We are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us' MV 9*

## Monday 30<sup>th</sup> November

It is one thing to understand with our minds what mercy might mean, but it is something else to understand it with our hearts. What does mercy feel like?

The parable of the prodigal son helps us to connect to this. The son sees what he has done wrong, sees how he has gone chasing after things that do not matter, while neglecting the things that are really important; so he goes back home, happy just to be treated as one of his father's servants. In his mind the old relationship with family and home is gone, broken beyond repair. His father has something else in mind. Before the son has even spoken the speech he has prepared the father summons his servants: *'Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet'* (Lk 15.22RSV). The son believed his place in the family was gone for ever, broken beyond repair; but with his robe, and ring, and shoes, the father restores it.

This story helps us to understand how mercy feels, it helps us to understand it with our hearts: **something beautiful that I had thought was broken beyond repair, gone for ever, is restored through the generous self-gift of another.**

## Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> December

In the parable of the prodigal son, the returning son is surprised by the generosity of his father; it is a generosity that unexpectedly restores a relationship the son thought had gone for ever. This in itself is wonderful enough, but there is a quality in this restored relationship that is new, that was not there before.

Imagine two pottery jugs, which at first sight look identical. On closer inspection it is clear that one of them is perfect, but the other has been shattered into dozens of pieces, but skillfully restored. If the jugs are antiques, the perfect one will probably be more valuable; but which will be more interesting? Looking at the jug that has been restored we can see it has a story. Who did it belong to? How did it come to be so badly broken: was it an accident, or was it smashed deliberately, or was it thrown across a room, what happened? Perhaps most interesting of all, who repaired it, and why did they go to so much trouble to restore it? The pieces could have been discarded, but they weren't: what is the story of its breaking, and what is the story of its restoring? The broken jug has a fascination that the perfect one does not.

We are, each one of us, those broken pottery jugs, damaged again and again, then lovingly restored. Each restoration tells the tale of a father's merciful love.

Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> December

## **The Mercy of God**

I am copying down in a book from my heart's archives  
the day that I ceased to fear God with a shadowy fear.  
Would you name it the day that I measured my column of virtue  
and sighted through windows of merit a crown that was near?  
Ah, no, it was rather the day I began to see truly  
That I came forth from nothing and ever toward nothingness tend,  
that the works of my hands are a foolishness wrought in the  
    presence  
of the worthiest king in a kingdom that never shall end.  
I rose up from the acres of self that I tended with passion  
and defended with flurries of pride:  
I walked out of myself and went into the woods of God's mercy,  
and here I abide.  
There is greenness and calmness and coolness, a soft leafy covering  
from the judgment of sun overhead,  
and the hush of His peace, and the moss of His mercy to tread.  
I have naught but my will seeking God; even love burning in me  
is a fragment of infinite loving and never my own.  
And I Fear God no more; I go forward to wander forever  
in a wilderness made of His infinite mercy alone.

*Sr. Miriam of the Holy Spirit OCD (Jessica Powers)*

Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> December

**Although everyone wishes to be shown mercy  
only a few wish to show it.**

It is a wonderful thing to be the recipient of mercy, to know that what we had thought broken beyond repair has been restored; however, we find it much easier to receive mercy than to give it. It has always been that way. St Caesarius of Arles (468/470-542) wrote about this some 1500 years ago.

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. ‘Mercy’ is a beautiful word: more beautiful still is the thing itself. All men wish to receive it, but the worst thing is that not all of them behave in a way that deserves it. Although everyone wishes to be shown mercy only a few wish to show it.*

O man, how can you have the effrontery to ask for what you refuse to give to others? You must show mercy in this world if you want to receive mercy in heaven. So, my dearest brethren, since we all desire mercy, let us make ourselves mercy’s slaves in this world so that she can give us our freedom in the world to come. For there is mercy in heaven and we come to it through earthly mercies. As Scripture says: *Lord, your mercy is in heaven.*

So there is earthly and heavenly mercy: that is, human and divine. What is human mercy? Exactly this: to have care for the sufferings of the poor. What is divine mercy? Without doubt, to grant forgiveness of sins. Whatever human mercy gives away on the journey, divine mercy pays back when we arrive at last in our native land. For it is God who feels cold and hunger, in the person of the poor. As he himself has said: *As much as you have done for the least of these, you have done it for me.* What God deigns to give on heaven, he yearns to receive on earth.”

Let us make ourselves mercy’s slaves in this world...

## Friday 4<sup>th</sup> December

A few miles West of Midhurst is the Church of St George, Trotton. On the West wall are some wonderful medieval wall paintings. In the centre is Christ in judgement; then on one side are pictures of the seven deadly sins, on the other side pictures of the seven corporal works of mercy. These paintings are meant to make you catch your breath. At the end of Mass you would turn to leave the church, and as you walked down the aisle you would see the two groups of pictures. Silently they ask you, on Judgement Day will your life hold more evidence of the seven deadly sins, or of the works of mercy?

The contrast between sins and acts of mercy is important. They are evidence of two different sorts of life, different sets of priorities, but they are more than that. The works of mercy are tools that will help us overcome sin. If we know ourselves, know our weaknesses, from examining our consciences, then a conscious decision to take up works of mercy will help us, with God's grace, to overcome them. If I know that I am easily tempted to pride, for example, then a decision to change my life, to make a space for feeding the hungry or clothing the naked may help knock some of that pride away.

The works of mercy are not just good for the people who receive mercy; they are good for those who give it, too, because they make us more human. They are not just the contrast to sin, they are, in part at least, the antidote to it.



## Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> December

If we believe in mercy, can we also believe in justice? If you are merciful, doesn't that mean you must ignore justice?

We know that God is good, and God is love. So he can only react to evil, to sin, in one way. Sin is destructive, it damages people, makes them less human, it prevents them from flourishing and thriving, and so God is always appalled by it. So, when I say something that hurts another person, the heart of God is wounded. 'Punish him!' you might call out. You might say to God that he ought to make me pay. But who are we to tell God what to do? What is the code of conduct that we presume to judge his actions by? Is he our employee, someone who we can call to account for not doing as we wish? In his love he chooses to be merciful. BUT this is not some soft-hearted weakness. His mercy has a purpose. God chooses to be merciful to give me space, space in which to realize what I have done, to feel contrition and to seek forgiveness.

The mercy of God is not weakness, it is strength. He holds back his justified anger, anger at my damaging myself and others, so that I can have space to seek conversion. The purpose of God's mercy is not to let me off, weakly to put up with bad behaviour; it is to give me time to change. If I do not realize this, if I do not use this time wisely, then I am squandering the mercy of God.

*'Divine mercy grants sinners a period of grace and desires their conversion. Mercy is ultimately grace for conversion.'*

(Cardinal Walter Kasper)

## Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> December

Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful, so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbours' souls and come to their rescue.

Help me, O Lord, that my ears may be merciful, so that I may give heed to my neighbours' needs and not be indifferent to their pains and moanings.

Help me, O Lord, that my tongue may be merciful, so that I should never speak negatively of my neighbour, but have a word of comfort and forgiveness for all.

Help me, O Lord, that my hands may be merciful and filled with good deeds, so that I may do only good to my neighbours and take upon myself the more difficult and toilsome tasks.

Help me, O Lord, that my feet may be merciful, so that I may hurry to assist my neighbour, overcoming my own fatigue and weariness. My true rest is in the service of my neighbour.

Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful so that I myself may feel all the sufferings of my neighbour. I will refuse my heart to no one. I will be sincere even with those who, I know, will abuse my kindness. And I will lock myself up in the most merciful heart of Jesus. I will bear my own suffering in silence. May Your mercy, O Lord, rest upon me.

You yourself command me to exercise the three degrees of mercy. The first: the act of mercy, of whatever kind. The second: the word of mercy – if I cannot carry out a work of mercy, I will assist by my words. The third: prayer – if I cannot show mercy by my deeds or words, I can always do so by prayer. My prayer reaches out even there where I cannot reach out physically.

O my Jesus, transform me into yourself, for You can do all things.

*St Faustina's Diary*

## Monday 7<sup>th</sup> December

Today we have reached the eve of the Year of Mercy: tomorrow it all begins. Tomorrow the Holy Father will open the Holy Door in St Peter's, but for now it remains closed. Today, then, we might imagine ourselves to be waiting outside the Holy Door. On one level, of course, a door is just a door, but this particular door is a very powerful symbol. A closed door speaks powerfully of exclusion, of failure, even of hopelessness: I have come all this way, and I cannot get in...

Outside a door that is closed we imagine what it might be like inside. We imagine the warmth, and the light, and the company and the laughter; outside it is cold and lonely and frankly it feels a little unsafe. So the opening of the Holy Door will be a powerfully symbolic action, an action that speaks very clearly. It will say that the way to the Father's heart is open: it is his wish that all should be inside, not outside. The doorway is the boundary between two worlds, the world of the outsider and the world of the one who belongs. The decision to cross the threshold rests with us.

This is a momentous opportunity. Perhaps this Year of Mercy will be the time when, at last, we decide to leave behind some foolish aspect of our lives, something that we know at heart is destructive, but which pride and familiarity and habit have so far prevented us from rejecting. So often it is we ourselves who choose to stay outside, because outside is the world we know best. Tomorrow the door will be open. The choice to enter rests with us.

Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> December

## **The Immaculate Conception of The Blessed Virgin Mary**

### **Opening of The Year of Mercy**

Today is the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of The Second Vatican Council, which is why it was chosen to open the Year of Mercy. But it is also highly suitable, as the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Mary is the gate, the door, through which God flooded the world with mercy in Christ, and through her heart we navigate our way back to him:

Mary the dawn, Christ the Perfect Day;  
Mary the gate, Christ the Heavenly Way!

The familiar hymn *Salve Regina* reminds us that Mary is '*mater misericordiae*' (mother of mercy) and calls on her for help: *illos, tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte* – turn your eyes of mercy towards us.

Mary is, however, more than just a door to Christ. She is also a prophet of mercy. Singing her song of praise when she visits Elizabeth she proclaims 'His mercy is from age to age on those who fear him' (Luke 1.50). For Mary, the whole history of God's dealings with his people is a revelation of his merciful love. As the Year of Mercy begins, she summons us to join her in seeing the world with eyes of mercy, in seeing and naming the mercy of God at work.

Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> December

## **The Works of Mercy**

We have already noted the Pope's 'burning desire' that we reflect on the works of mercy in this year. He is not alone in seeing them as a vital part of what it means to be a Christian. Here is a quotation from Dorothy Day that is worth spending some time with:

*"Everything a baptized person does every day should be directly or indirectly related to the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy."*

Everything...every day. That is quite a challenge. Fr Robert Barron helps us to understand what Dorothy Day is getting at:

*"What she meant was that the intellectual convictions associated with being a baptized Christian...look like something in practice...It is insufficient for a responsible Christian to hold to truths that don't show up in his body and actions"*  
(Robert Barron)

What we believe about God, what we believe about the world that he has created and the people that he has placed in it, is not just an intellectual exercise. If we really believe it, then that has consequences about the way that we choose to live. Just what that might look like in practice is what we will consider for the remainder of Advent.

Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> December

## **Feed the Hungry**

*"When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice."*

St Gregory The Great

We have few opportunities in our daily lives directly to feed the hungry. But the fact that we do not meet them face to face does not mean we can ignore this challenge. Some 795 million people worldwide do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life. That's about 1 in every 9 of the world's population. Of course, the causes are complex and they include corrupt governments, violence and theft, unfair trade rules, many things that it is difficult for us to influence ourselves. But the fact remains that while we have the luxury of choosing what we will eat tonight, many other people, each made in God's image and likeness and infinitely precious to him, will go to sleep hungry – again.

Two courses of action summon us. One is to find some organization that works to feed the hungry, someone we feel that we can trust to use our money wisely, and then to support them generously: more generously than our first, instinctive choice. The second is to be educated and active in understanding why people are hungry, and in pressing our government to act. Unless they think it is a priority for us, the ordinary people, it will slip down the list of priorities.

Friday 11<sup>th</sup> December

## **Give Drink to the Thirsty**

Once again, we probably seldom come into direct contact with people who are thirsty (although there are one billion people in the world who do not have access to clean drinking water). So in what way can this challenge become a part of our lives of mercy?

In 'The Gift' Lewis Hyde describes a scene at restaurants in rural France. People sit at a communal table, and in front of each place is a bottle of wine. When two people, even strangers, sit next to each other one will pick up his bottle of wine and pour some not into his own glass, but into the glass of his neighbour; the neighbour then picks up his own bottle, and returns the favour. The result is exactly the same as if each had simply filled his own glass, but yet the whole thing feels totally different. A real bond has been established, without a word being spoken.

Taking as read the laudable support for charities that provide drinking water in developing countries, this work of mercy can be thought of as being about the quality of our hospitality. Hospitality is a gift, by which we establish connectedness, build community, and bring the lonely stranger in from the cold. The gift of hospitality makes us more human. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well; she is an outcast, condemned to collecting water at the hottest time of day when no-one else is about. But Jesus asks her for a drink, and in doing so he draws out of her a work of mercy: she is an outsider no longer, and she is made more human, more authentic, she is surprised by being allowed to enter into a real relationship with another.

Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> December

## **Clothe the Naked**

Once more, we know that there are people in the world who have no clothes, but apart from the praiseworthy decision to give some clothes to charities that work, say, with the homeless, what might this mean for us in practice?

The last thing that is done to Jesus before his crucifixion, is that he is stripped of his clothes. No doubt this is partly about giving the soldiers one of the perks of the job, some free clothes, but it also serves a more sinister purpose. Clothes give a person dignity; remove their clothes in public, and you humiliate them. Clothes form a barrier that protect us from the outside world, and they also express something about our personality, they tell people something about the culture from which we come. Remove those clothes and I cease to be 'me' with my own history, my own personality, and I could be anyone: I could be just a number, I am no longer a person, just a human being.

So this work of mercy invites us to protect the dignity of human beings. This is very much needed. So often there is the temptation to pretend that someone doesn't really count as human at all, because then they can be disposed of at will. If we persuade ourselves that the unborn, or the dying, or the deeply miserable, are not really human persons, then we can treat them as things. This temptation must be resisted: more than that, it must be opposed. We are challenged to cloak every human being, however strange, or alien, or threatening, or inconvenient they may be, in the protective clothing of human dignity.



Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December

## Welcome the Stranger

Of all the works of mercy, perhaps this one is the most topical, and in many ways the most challenging. This is a year in which Europe has seen almost unprecedented numbers of strangers looking for a welcome, and the response has been very polarized. The challenge has played to our fear of the outsider, our fear of the different, our fear that this might challenge our lifestyle, might challenge our comfort. In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis quoted something his predecessor said about the need to share resources throughout the world more fairly: he said that this might mean that those of us who live “*in technologically advanced societies must be prepared to encourage more sober lifestyles*”. We might apply this to the issue of welcoming the stranger, too. If the price of welcoming the stranger is that we have to live a slightly more sober lifestyle in order to support them, is that such a very bad thing?

The Catholic Church in this country knows all about immigration. Looking at our congregation, how many of our parents and grandparents were born outside this country?

It is not only our country, or our families, that need to respond to the challenge to welcome the stranger, but our churches too. One image that Pope Francis has used several times to describe the Church is a field hospital after battle, dealing with all the wounds and injuries inflicted by life in the world of today. This is a powerful image, but the field hospital will only operate if people find there a ready welcome, a listening ear, a real love. The most beautifully equipped hospital in the world will be no use if no patients come to it.

Monday 14<sup>th</sup> December

## Heal the Sick

Some people have a particular role to play in healthcare, either as professionals or as volunteers. But this work of mercy is inviting us to a radical change in the way that we see people who are sick. Sickness separates, isolates and dis-integrates. People become cut off from their friends, their families, their familiar world; they even become cut off from their history, from who they are, from their very selves. Sickness breaks up and separates: imagine a formerly active, sociable busy person now confined to bed, unable to do simple things for themselves, unable just to call a friend or visit the family. Our society often colludes with this dis-integration, this separation, by hiding sickness and disability away and acting as if they are abnormal, embarrassing, even shameful: the image of our world is the young, fit, beautiful, powerful person.

This work of mercy challenges us to say that in the Church it will be different. We will resist this tendency to hide and marginalize the sick. For us they are not a burden, they are a glorious treasure, and in our care for them we have the privilege of serving Christ. We will insist on bringing them back from the margins, we will do all we can to make sure that they feel valued, that they are privileged members of our family.

*'[The Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.'* 2 Corinthians 12.9-10 RSV

Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> December

## Visit the Imprisoned

Most of us have little experience of prison. Perhaps we have an idea of what it might be like from things we have seen on the television, or on films, but we have little idea of what it might feel like for real people, with families, with fears, with their own history of failures and temptations. We can never fully understand what has brought people to end up there. We need to work hard to overcome our prejudices. As George Eliot observed *“People are almost always better than their neighbours think they are.”*

In Bolivia Pope Francis spoke very movingly as he visited prisoners, something he regularly does on his travels:

“You may be asking yourselves: “Who is this man standing before us?”. I would like to reply to that question with something absolutely certain about my own life. The man standing before you is a man who has experienced forgiveness. A man who was, and is, saved from his many sins. That is who I am. I don't have much more to give you or to offer you, but I want to share with you what I do have and what I love. It is Jesus Christ, the mercy of the Father.

Jesus came to show the love which God has for us. For you and for me. It is a love which is powerful and real. It is a love which takes seriously the plight of those he loves. It is a love which heals, forgives, raises up and shows concern. It is a love which draws near and restores dignity. We can lose this dignity in so many ways. But Jesus is stubborn: he gave his very life to restore the identity we had lost.”

Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> December

## **Bury the Dead**

There was a time when the poor simply could not afford to give the people they loved a decent burial, and so it was a practical act of mercy to undertake this for them. This is seldom the case now, at least in our country. So what might this work of mercy mean for us? The burial of the dead is clearly a practical action, but it is much more than that. Human bodies are terribly important. It is through our bodies that we experience the world, and relate to one another. It is through our bodies that we express care for each other, through our bodies that we are able to give, and also to receive, love. We communicate a great deal with words, of course, but also we communicate with our bodies: our gestures, our smile, our laughter, our tears, even just a gentle touch on the shoulder. Our bodies are like a second voice with which we speak, and as we look at the body of someone we love, we hear that voice again. Our bodies matter, and so the disposal of the bodies of the dead with dignity is very important; this is especially true in a culture that is often embarrassed, frightened, uncertain in the face of death.

So, we fulfil this work of mercy today by helping the bereaved celebrate funerals with dignity and reverence. Sometimes people say that they didn't go to a funeral because they didn't know the person who died, but this is all wrong. Our attendance at their funeral, our prayers for them, our participation in Masses celebrated for them, helps them on their way to Heaven. In addition it comforts the bereaved; they know that the person who died is special to them, but when they come to the funeral and the Church is full this is a great source of comfort to them. We surround them with affection and with prayer to support and to protect them. We should never hesitate about whether or not to go to a funeral: it is an act of mercy.

Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> December

## **Counsel the Doubtful**

Doubts come in many different shapes and sizes. Sometimes we just cannot understand something; on other occasions something just doesn't feel right; other times we realize no-one else seems to agree with us, and it makes us doubt. All these things need to be dealt with in different ways. We tend to imagine that there is a sharp distinction between certainty on the one hand, and doubt on the other; sometimes we even think that there is something wrong with us if we have doubts. But Pope Francis, with great frankness, has told us that even he has been through times of doubt *"Who among us has not experienced insecurity, confusion and even doubt on our journey of faith? We have all experienced this, myself as well"*. What really matters is that we use these times wisely as opportunities for growth, that we seek out someone who can offer us advice.

It is not the case that we must choose between doubt and certainty; there is another way, the way the Church puts before us, the way of faith.

*Faith is not the result of human effort, of human reasoning, but rather a gift of God...Faith starts with God, who opens his heart to us and invites us to share in his own divine life. Faith does not simply provide information about who Christ is; rather, it entails a personal relationship with Christ, a surrender of our whole person, with all our understanding, will and feelings, to God's self-revelation. (Pope Benedict XVI)*

To counsel the doubtful is to invite people to renew their friendship with Christ, to place their hand once more into his wounded hand and let him lead them, and if necessary while we walk beside them.

Friday 18<sup>th</sup> December

## **Instruct the ignorant**

None of us likes to think of ourselves as ignorant; we equate this somehow with being 'stupid'. But ignorance simply means that we do not know something. Sometimes this is our own fault, because we should have found out: I am lost on my way to visit someone, because I should have found out for sure where they live before I set out. Other times ignorance is not our fault: I am lost because there is a diversion on the road and someone has taken one of the signs so I don't know which way to go. Unfortunately, because we don't like to admit our ignorance, we often pretend that we do know something, when in fact we don't. We often hold strong opinions that we are simply not able to back up with argument. Ignorance and arrogance often seem to live together. We do need to have the humility to find someone who can help us.

Teaching and authority are not very fashionable: in a culture where every opinion is given equal value (even ignorant ones based on poor arguments) it is hard to say 'Listen, and I will teach you'. In some ways the Church of our own age has lost confidence in its need to teach and instruct. We somehow expect people to learn things by a sort of osmosis, or by accident. We are reluctant to proclaim the truth that some things are good and other things are bad; we are reluctant to tell our children about the spiritual world, because we know that other people will tell them it is all rubbish. So we stay silent, and then wonder why things of the spirit do not seem to matter to them. But our silence robs people of mercy: where ignorance goes unchallenged, mercy

Of course, we must always remember one very important truth: the first person who needs to be instructed is myself. Each of us must take responsibility for doing that.

Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> December

## **Admonish Sinners**

Surely this is the hardest one of all? Given a choice we would happily feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, forgive those who offend us, if it would get us off having to stand up to someone and say 'What you are doing is wrong'. But there is something important to grasp here. This is a work of mercy. So, if we decide not to do this we are withholding mercy from someone, just as surely as if we refuse forgiveness to one who has offended us.

Sin damages us. It destroys our relationships, it damages people around us and, if it becomes a habit, each unchecked sin makes future sin more likely, and the return to virtue more difficult. If we stand back and allow sin to go unchallenged, we become complicit in the damage a person does to themselves and others.

We are frightened by the contemporary commandment: 'Do not judge'; again and again we hear Pope Francis' much misused question 'who am I to judge?' But listen to the words of Christ: *'If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone...If he listens to you, you have won back your brother.'* (Matthew 18.15 JB)

It is never for us to judge a person in the sense of saying they are worth more or less than any other, nor is it for us to weigh up how blameworthy they are; but if we see someone doing something that is wrong, to stand by silently is not only cowardly it is also cruel. We admonish the sinner not to humiliate or embarrass them, but to recall them to reality, to help them experience the hope and transforming power of repentance. If we do not confront the sinner, we deprive them of the opportunity of repentance and forgiveness.

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December

## **Comfort the Afflicted**

At first sight this seems so general as to be almost meaningless. But we need to remind ourselves that this is one of the spiritual works of mercy, so it challenges us to come to the help of those who are enduring spiritual affliction, spiritual pain. This can be debilitating, it expands to fill the whole of a person's life, and they struggle to break free.

Spiritual pain arises from a strong sense that things are not as they should be. My life should be like that, but in fact it is like this, and the gap between the two is so enormous that it is crippling, I am unable to see any way across it. Things should not be like this, it is all wrong, this just should not have happened.

Of course, there is probably very little that we can say that will make this any better. Our glib answers will not solve the problem. But our presence with someone might. When people are suffering inside, it can be very hard just to be with them, because we want to avoid pain ourselves and we find it difficult to watch them suffering. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus had to become so like us that he even experienced suffering as we do, so that we can know that he has been there before us. There is someone who has felt the same as us, and has survived and overcome, been reassembled and able to live once more. Our work of mercy is to refuse to abandon the afflicted, to stay close to them and try to help them feel the presence of this one who has experienced suffering beyond our imagining.



Monday 21<sup>st</sup> December

## Forgive Offences

Forgiveness is not an emotion, a feeling, it does not depend on how I feel. It is a choice, an act of the will, something that I make a decision to do. I do not wait until I feel like forgiving someone, because that moment may simply never come: the time is now.

Dying on the cross, cruelly and unfairly condemned, Jesus speaks one of the most frightening verses in scripture: *'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'* (Lk 23.34 JB) The people who are responsible for his death have not asked to be forgiven; they have not shown any sign of remorse or regret, yet he forgives them. This is an act of mercy, because it sets them free from the burden of the past. They need not be slaves to what they have done. One day, perhaps, they will look back with sorrow on this act of cruelty, and at that moment the forgiveness they have already been offered will set them free.

To withhold forgiveness is a terrible thing: terrible for the one who has caused the injury, because he is forever tied to what he has done, and ever bound up with his injured victim; but it is also a terrible thing for the one who has been wronged, because the withholding of forgiveness hardens and distorts our heart. It is a very difficult thing to do, to let go of our sense of wrong and hurt. This is why God is so profligate, so generous, so crazily free in the forgiveness he offers to us, because to forgive is to live life as it was meant to be lived: God shows us how it is done. Forgiveness works a great miracle, because it allows a true restoration of what has been lost. Dag Hammarskjöld described it like this:

*"Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is made clean again."*

Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> December

## **Bear Patiently those who Do us Ill**

This offers us a real challenge. Not only are we to bear wrongs, that is to put up with them and not to kick and shout about it, but we must do it with patience. When someone harms us, our first reaction is to do precisely the opposite, it is to fight back and to do it immediately. We feel hurt and angry and vulnerable, and we want to do something about it. We want to make sure that they know, and we want to make sure that they do not get away with it. We can find all sorts of reasons to justify a response that is swift, and is aggressive. Remember, though, Jesus' words to his friends:

*'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" Matthew 5.44 RSV*

All through his life Jesus has to endure persecution, misunderstanding, and repeated attempts to trap and trick him. His response is one of great patience. He never resorts to offensive language or to violence, he never attacks the individual person, but he does challenge them to look at what they are doing and see where their arguments and reasoning are weak or self-deluding. Bearing wrongs patiently allows us to stop, to reflect carefully on what has happened and to respond with words and actions that are measured, reasoned and gentle. It is a work of mercy: the person who is hurting us is needy and damaged, because what they are doing is inhuman and degrading. They need help, they need to be helped to see what they are doing as it really is. Now we may or may not succeed in doing this, but only if we are patient will we have the chance of responding in a way that is life-affirming, rather than in a way that is destructive and simply perpetuates a cycle of attack and counter-attack.

Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> December

## **Pray for the Living and the Dead**

In many cases the works of mercy involve us intervening directly to help someone who is present with us. Prayer allows us to extend our work to those who are physically remote from us. It is good, of course, to pray for the people that are close to us, for the people that we meet regularly, but in prayer we are also able to unite ourselves with those who are far away. Everything and everyone is connected. I cannot travel to the world's latest trouble spot, where people are suffering, but I can pray for the people there, standing in solidarity with them. We do not live isolated and solitary lives. What is good for you brings fulfillment to me.

Baptised into the priesthood of Christ, we are all called to fulfil the priestly role of bringing the world before God in prayer. Even those who have died can benefit from my prayer, and perhaps most beautiful of all, my prayers for those who have no-one to pray for them are effective to fulfil God's will in them.

Much of our prayer is directed at our own sanctification: it is intended to open us up to God's action within us. Prayer for others, however, is aimed at coming to their help, and that is why we call it a work of mercy. When we feel powerless to help, watching the story of yet another disaster on the news, we need to remind ourselves that we are not powerless, we have an effective tool at our disposal.

Prayer is a wonderful thing: prayer works!

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> December

**Know today that the Lord will come:  
in the morning you will see his glory**

So now we wait, for the Lord is very near. In the middle of all the busy-ness of Christmas Eve we grab a few moments peace, a few moments stillness, and wonder what the child of mercy will bring to us. Life is very busy, and lots is going on, but as we wait for his coming it is good to stop and think for a moment about what we lack, what is missing, what we hope he might supply.

What should we be thinking about as we wait to receive the child, what should we be preparing for him?

*“We can say with confidence that, in the final analysis, our only responsibility as Christians is to embrace with love Jesus, God’s Word – each of us according to our capacity, but all of us ardently – as we receive him from the arms of the father, Mary, the Church, grace. All else – whether in the life of interior prayer, of liturgical worship, or of fraternal charity – will quite literally take care of itself. For everything in Christian life is a consequence of our union with Jesus.”*

## **Where do those quotations come from:**

'MV' refers to *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Bull of Indiction of the Year of Mercy written by Pope Francis and published in April 2015

### **Front cover**

Illustration: Christ the Good Shepherd by Adé Béthune

"Mercy is an indispensable dimension of love..."

St John Paul II *Dives in Misericordia* n.7 (1980)

### **Introduction**

"You can't conceive, my child..."

Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (1938)

### **December 2<sup>nd</sup>**

"I am copying down in a book..."

'The Mercy of God' from *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*

### **December 3<sup>rd</sup>**

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy..."

Sermon of St Caesarius of Arles, Office of Readings, Monday of 17<sup>th</sup> week of Ordinary Time

### **December 5<sup>th</sup>**

"Divine mercy grants sinners a period of grace..."

Walter Kasper, *'Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life'* 2014

### **December 6<sup>th</sup>**

"Help me, O Lord..."

*St Faustina's Diary*, Quoted in *'Mercy, the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life'* by Cardinal Walter Kasper

### **December 8<sup>th</sup>**

"Mary the dawn, Christ the Perfect Day"

Hymn found in various collections, author unknown

### **December 9<sup>th</sup>**

“Everything a baptized person does..”

Dorothy Day, quoted in Bishop Robert Barron ‘*Exploring Catholic Theology*’

“What she meant was...”

Bishop Robert Barron ‘*Exploring Catholic Theology*’

### **December 10<sup>th</sup>**

“When we attend to the needs of those in want...”

St Gregory the Great, quoted in Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 2446

### **December 13<sup>th</sup>**

“...in technologically advanced societies...”

Pope Francis *Laudato Si* n.193 (2015)

### **December 15<sup>th</sup>**

“People are almost always better”

George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1874)

“You may be asking yourselves...”

Pope Francis, visit to Santa Cruz-Palmasola Rehabilitation Centre, Bolivia, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2015 reported by Vatican Radio

### **December 17<sup>th</sup>**

“Who among us has not experienced insecurity...”

Pope Francis, General Audience, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2013

“Faith is not the result of human effort...”

Pope Benedict XVI Homily at Mass for World Youth Day in Madrid 21<sup>st</sup> August 2011

### **December 21<sup>st</sup>**

“Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream...”

Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings* 1964

### **December 24<sup>th</sup>**

“We can say with confidence that, in the final analysis...”

Erasmus Leiva-Merikakis ‘*Fire of Mercy, Heart of The World*’ Vol II (2003)

## Scripture Readings

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