Walk through the Doors of Mercy

Two years ago Pope Francis announced that 2016 was to be a Jubilee Year, a Holy Year of Mercy. Holy Years in the Catholic Church date back to the beginning of the fourteenth century. They were originally called every twenty-five to fifty years, at the pope’s discretion, and were a time of pilgrimage to holy sites and a time when sins were forgiven. Our Holy Year of Mercy began at the end of last year on 8 December, when the Pope opened the Jubilee doors of St Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican in Rome, and will end on 20 November this year, the Feast of Christ the King, which marks the end of our Liturgical Year.

It is intended that this Holy Year be a time for all of us to grow spiritually, and to do works of mercy. Works of mercy are part of traditional Catholic teaching. What these works of mercy are really all about is our presence in the world, and our presence to each other. They are about how we ourselves might grow and shape our relationships with others, those both near and far, and how we respond to the cries of our world. There are spiritual works of mercy, and these are: to instruct, to advise, to console, to comfort, to forgive, to bear wrongs patiently and to pray for the living and the dead. And there are bodily works of mercy: to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, to bury the dead, to give alms to the poor. They are all, both the spiritual works and the bodily works, marks of a life lived in faithfulness to Jesus, in
openness to the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts. This year we are invited to ponder these things, and to grow more and more fully into them.

The theme of this Holy Year is, ‘Merciful like the Father’, and Pope Francis is saying some wonderfully inviting, life-giving and yet challenging things about where we might journey in this Holy Year. Just last month he sent a special message to the youth of the world, and this is what he said: “This Holy Year is a time when we can discover that life together as brothers and sisters is like a great party, perhaps the most beautiful party we can imagine, the endless party that Jesus has taught us to celebrate by his Spirit. No one is excluded from this party”. And then he went on to explain the theme, ‘Merciful like the Father’: “Being merciful means to grow in a love that is courageous, generous and real. As youth, you are preparing to be Christians capable of making courageous choices and decisions, in order to build daily, even through little things, a world of peace. Remain steadfast in the journey of faith, with firm hope in the Lord. This is the secret of our journey! He gives us the courage to swim against the tide - pay attention, because while going against the current is good for the heart, we need courage to swim against the tide. Jesus gives us this courage! With Jesus we can do great things. We Christians were not chosen by the Lord for little things; push onwards toward the highest principles. Stake your lives on noble ideals. Be brave and go against the tide; be friends of Jesus, who is the Prince of Peace. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion”.

What an invitation! As I read these words I found myself filled with images of the noise and clutter of the world, calling out its various messages, demanding our attention, requiring us to conform, to consume, to profit, to close up in fear, to look suspiciously upon those who are ‘the other’, to build walls, to buy into that increasingly pervasive message that what will make us happy is more and more of what is on offer. And yet, here is Pope Francis, inviting us all, yet again, into that timeless path of faith, telling us to go against the tide, to leave behind our own needs and preferences, not to succumb to the life-denying voices in the
world, and to follow the One who is indeed Mercy himself, and to build a world of justice and peace. How will we respond?

First of all, let’s think about what mercy actually is. While I was doing some reading around this Holy Year I came upon a wonderful description of mercy. It was written by a young person, and he said: “Mercy is entering the chaos of other people’s lives”. What an extraordinarily insightful statement! When what is happening around us, to us, or within us, is overwhelming, when things seem to be out of our control, when we feel powerless, that is chaos. The chaos of peoples’ lives, the chaos of our own lives, may be many things: fear, anxiety, illness, hurt, broken relationships, poor choices and the consequences of those choices, addiction, low self-esteem, loneliness, chronic negativity. Chaos in people’s lives is poverty, homelessness, unemployment, sleeping rough, wondering where the next meal is coming from, holding a dying child in your arms when there is no medical treatment available, walking for days and weeks on end seeking a country to take you in, setting out to sea in a leaky boat, gazing out from behind the wire fence of a detention centre, holding within you the memory and the horror and shame of sexual abuse, working long hours chained to a sewing machine in a sweat shop - and we could go on and on. Yes, chaos is all too familiar a face in our world and in our hearts.

And yet, we are reminded that into all this comes Mercy! “I want celebration of the Holy Year to be for all believers a true moment of encounter with the mercy of God”, says Pope Francis. “May it be a living experience of the closeness of the Father, whose tenderness is almost tangible. The mercy of God is able to transform hearts”.

Every person’s experience of God’s mercy will be unique and personal. And it is right here, in the very ‘stuff’ of our day to day lives, that the streams of grace and mercy will flow. Whatever it is that is happening for us and within us, we must remember that we are not defined by any single act or word, no matter how overwhelming that may seem at the time.
Each of us is worth so much more than our worst choice or our worst thought. I don’t think we take that to heart seriously enough! No single action of ours tells the whole story of who we are. No weakness is definitive of us. The hurts we carry around, the patterns of harmful attitudes or behaviours we regularly slip into, are not all there is. They are just part of the story. Too often we lose sight of that.

But, we must remember too, that together, all those choices will make up our life story. I remember when I was in my last year at school, the fashion was to have little ‘autograph books’ which were passed around and in which we all wrote wise messages for each other, to take with us as we left school. One of the little pearls of wisdom someone wrote in mine was this: “Your life lies before you like a field of untrodden snow, be careful how you walk it, for every mark will show”. Those marks are the good and noble and courageous marks, what Pope Francis calls generous and courageous love, and they are also the not so good marks, the mistakes, the poor choices we will all surely make at times. But when we do make those poor choices, we need to do something quite counter-intuitive in those moments of darkness and shame. We need to remember that God’s door is always open. And not only remember that, but take it to heart, feel it, surrender into it. When we do blunder and fall, our sense of failure and shame, embarrassment, frustration or disappointment, can kick in very powerfully, and our first reaction may more than likely be to run away. And so we become defensive and self-protective, we withdraw and often too, as we lash out in defiance, we lose all sense of a moral compass, we harden our hearts.

But when we do find ourselves in those prickly inner places, let’s remember the story of the son who came home. What a story of mercy! This fabulous story is in the Gospel of Luke. It is a story about a son who came home and a father who ran out to meet him. The son had asked his father for his inheritance, left home, and squandered the money on wild living. The father had given him the money, seen him leave, and I’m sure, spent many a heart-
broken moment wondering where he was and what he was doing, and, would he ever return. Having lived it up and finding himself penniless, hungry and alone, the son eventually did go home. And the father, seeing him approaching in the distance, ran out to meet him, embraced him, threw a party for him and welcomed him back into the family. There is another son in the story too, an older brother. He found it hard to cope with this. He could only think of what a good and trustworthy and faithful son he had always been. He had always worked hard for his father, he had not squandered his money and he was virtuous. But the father had never thrown a party for him! He was jealous. And the father, having to deal with this sibling jealousy, reminded his older son that he had always had everything he could give him, but that he was rejoicing and celebrating because the son he thought he had lost forever had come home.

It is such a well-known story that, in its familiarity, its impact can be lost on us. But it is good to remind ourselves of this. The stories Jesus told always had a strong emotional impact on his listeners and this story would certainly have shocked his first-century Jewish audience. This story, like all of his other parables, is a teaching story, and Jesus’ intention was to invite people into a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing and living, a new heart-space. So let’s have a look at just what this impact would have been and what Jesus was saying to them - and to us.

Even today in the culture of the Middle East it would be almost unheard of for a son to request and receive his inheritance before his father’s death. To do so, would be to wish his father dead, to consider him dead. It was an insult and a rejection. Jesus’ listeners would have expected the father not only to refuse the request but to be extremely angry and insulted by it, but instead, this father divides his living between his two sons and gives the younger son his share as requested. Later in the story, when the son had squandered the money and fallen on hard times, we hear that he ‘came to his senses’ or ‘returned to
himself’. This is the translation of the original Greek expression in the text which actually means that he was trying to find a way to save himself. He was in a mess. He did not decide to go home because he wanted to be reconciled with his father, rather, he wanted to save himself, literally, to fill his stomach, as he was starving. Biblical scholars suggest that if he had been repentant the text would have used the equivalent of the Hebrew word *shub* which means ‘return to God’. The son, before he set out to return, composed a speech that would give him the best chance of filling his empty stomach. He knew his father’s hired hands were eating well and so he decided he would go back and ask his father to take him on as one of those hired hands. He would pay his own way, and he would be saved from starvation. He would have known how it worked - such an insult to his father put him outside the family, made him no longer worthy to be his son. But he was returning because he was hungry and had run out of options. He would have expected anger and rejection. Then there was also the issue of the community’s response to him. The custom at that time was that any Jew who had lost money among foreigners would face the *kezazah*, ‘the cutting off’. This was performed by breaking a clay pot at the feet of such a person as a symbol that the community rejected him. So as he walked home, he would have been expecting all this.

But things played out quite differently! The father ran out to meet his son as he saw him approaching. This too was culturally shocking. It was considered humiliation for a man over forty to run. As he ran, the father would have had to lift his robe, another cultural humiliation. When father and son met, the son blurted out his prepared speech - ‘I am not worthy to be called your son’; ‘I have sinned against you’; ‘I am willing to be a hired hand in your household’. And here too was another shock. His father appeared not to even hear him! Not only did he welcome him and embrace him, but he gave him the symbols of his status in the family that he had spurned - the ring he placed on his finger and the robe the servants brought out for him. He gave him the best robe and he put shoes on his feet. In
those days slaves went barefoot and only sons wore shoes. So he was re-instated as his son. He put a ring on his finger, a symbol of being restored to his status in the family and having the power to transact business. In spite of what he had done, he came home and nothing had changed.

Rather than anger, shame or embarrassment about what his son had done to him, the father spread the news of his return and invited everyone to celebrate with him. This uncharacteristic behavior would have certainly caused some scandal amongst Jesus’ listeners! When the older son spoke out and complained about his father’s utterly absurd response to his brother’s return, Jesus’ listeners would have felt themselves on more familiar ground. The older brother would have been seen as justified in his criticism and in his protestation of his own virtue. But the father did not side with him and he found little comfort there. Instead he too was challenged to think anew. So everything in this story is ‘topsy-turvey’. It would have been utterly confronting to those people listening to Jesus, with their cultural certainties so firmly in place, as one by one, their expectations of what was right and proper were overturned.

This is a rich teaching story. It is a story about the overwhelming love of God! And what a story Jesus came up with to impress upon us just how beloved of God we are. No, there is no standard we have to measure up to in order to merit this love. Whatever conditions or limits we may put upon God’s love for us just aren’t there! It is an abundant, absurd love, and it knows no bounds. And yes, we know this, don’t we? We have heard it so often. It is our Christian theology, our understanding of God as pure Love. But we have to get it from our head into our heart! We have to live it ourselves. I think it may help us to do this if we enter the heart of the younger son and imagine his story within the story.
A young man, at that age when independence and identity are priority, seeks to spread his wings and claim that independence. What was he like? Confident, arrogant perhaps, adventurous? He seemed to set out to reject all that his father stood for. He seemed to disdain all that, for after all, he thought of his father as dead. He took what he could get out of him and set out. Did he look beyond the moment and wonder what the future would bring? Probably not. He lived for the moment, wildly, denying himself nothing. New friends were made, his family values were abandoned and he knew no restraints. Life was good and all was going well. Then the money was spent and things changed. His friends disappeared. He no longer had anything with which to attract them. No one wanted to know him. What was he to do? He felt lost and alone. So he did what he had never had to do before. He became a servant, a hired hand. He lost his status, his worth, his place in society. He found work in a pigsty, doing the unthinkable for a Jew. Not only was he now one of the despised of society, on the outer edges, of little worth, he was also outside the Law of God. He was unclean, an outsider in so many ways. Rejected by God? And then the unthinkable dawns on him: he will go home. But the shame! He will have to endure the taunts and jeers of those who will surely want to let him know how he has fallen. Will he be welcomed back? Of course not. His father will surely be angry, critical, punitive and true to the culture of his world. His father will surely reject him now and turn away from the son who has disgraced him. He will have to admit his failure and his bad choices. He will have to tell his pitiful story. He will make a fool of himself. The shame is overwhelming. But his need is greater.

How crucial it is to recognize our needs - our most deeply felt needs, those that will bring us to life. Shame can hem us in as surely as any prison bars, for to live in shame is indeed like a prison. It takes away our freedom and controls how we are and what we do. Shame can also lock us out. It can lock us out of good relationships and keep us away from joy, from peace, from God. It takes courage to acknowledge our bad decisions and our
mistakes. But an even greater mistake is to let shame entrap us. Sometimes shame can be hidden under arrogance or a ‘devil-may-care’ attitude. Sometimes shame can drive people further and further into the kind of behaviour they are ashamed of because it may seem easier to hide there. We all know moments of shame. It may not be writ large as in the story of this young son, but if we let it become the script of our lives it can be devastating.

The story of the son who came home, ashamed and desperate, can be the story of each one of us. It is a story of grace – the utterly unmerited outpouring of God’s love, and the tenderness and healing, the deep embrace and joy of that love when we do surrender to it, when we let go: ‘Fill me Lord, with your living water. Let it flow through the dry and barren places of my heart and bring forth new life’. In the end, no matter what the inner workings of our hearts and minds, we find sanctuary in God. Here we can freely acknowledge our foolishness, our mistakes, our plans gone wrong. It is a sanctuary that heals us and restores us and sends us out into the world with a healthy sense of who we are, able to stand tall as beloved of God, to face our weaknesses and relate openly and lovingly with others. It is a confidence, not so much in what we do, but in who we are. And when we have that confidence it becomes possible to say we are sorry when we need to. It becomes possible to accept our mistakes as part of the greater ebb and flow of our lives, rather than all defining. And it gives us the joy of awakening each day to a profoundly beautiful, life-giving relationship with the God who is Mercy.

Let us not be afraid to walk through those doors.

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