

"BEING MERCY"
ADDRESS TO SISTERS OF MERCY
On the Occasion of the 120 Years of Foundation of the Sisters of Mercy Parramatta
Edith Angel Hall. OLMC Parramatta
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Last Christmas I was fortunate to be in Paris. It was the first time I had been in Paris, that most feminine of cities, and as for all newcomers to Paris the city made a deep impression on me.

In particular, the great Cathedral of Notre Dame captured my imagination and my heart. For those who have been fortunate enough to have visited the basilica you will know how the building exudes vitality and spiritual warmth - even in the cold of winter. One can barely imagine the countless thousands that have felt the embrace of this building near on a thousand years.

The femininity of the basilica is in such contrast to the masculine, civil religion of the Pantheon, not far away, which celebrates the glory of French intellectualism but the interior which I found freezing. Compared to the emptiness of the Pantheon which I had visited just hours earlier many hundreds were roaming the interior of the Cathedral; many were just sitting quietly. In civil religion nothing is personal or relational. It is cerebral and intellectual, demanding, sterile. By contrast, in Notre Dame Cathedral humanity is celebrated - its glory and its vulnerability - not ideas. The spirit is one of hospitality. This is a cathedral in which people feel at home, people of all faiths, no faith. Here one senses lives are changed.

Paul Claude himself wrote around the time of his conversion in 1886, "Notre Dame is not just a building but a living person." Perhaps what enables such a comment is what is evoked by the sculpture at the very heart of the Cathedral: the Coustou brothers' sculpture of the Pietà. Its spiritual poignancy fascinated me, and I kept returning to it time and time again whilst I was in the city. In some ways, it was this poignancy with which I came away from Paris. It was Paris' gift to me and a gift that I would like to share with you today so that it might be my gift to you on this your special occasion.

The Coustou Pietà is quite different from the more famous Pietà of Michelangelo's in St. Peter's, Rome. No one could doubt the breathtaking exquisiteness of Michelangelo's masterpiece, but the Pietà in Notre Dame captivated my imagination far more intensely with its energy, its anguish and ardency. Its passion is of such eloquence.

For me the sculpture speaks of the nature of Mercy and that is, that it is born of grief which it transforms into hope. Mercy begins in grief and ends in hope. The sculpture details this central logic of Mercy.

Let us explore this logic a little more fully.

You would know better than I that in Hebrew, the word for 'mercy' is the same for 'womb'. Having mercy in the Hebrew mind is a motherly feeling - not soft-heartedness nor any feeling of bliss or sentiment, but that creative love which is like the pangs of birth. The Hebrews understood the convulsion that occurs in the life of God whenever God encounters suffering in his creation. For them, this convulsion had all the hallmarks of the contractions of birth giving. Having mercy means experiencing the pain of bringing the dead to life, of liberating, and loosing those who are bound.

The mercy of God is passionate life-giving creativity. It is redemptive love. It is love that knows and understands the forces of negativity but which has been able to affirm something more than the darkness. It is love that, even in the confusion of darkness, has been sensitive to the flicker of light present in human love, hope and transcendence. Whilst naming the darkness can also name this light and celebrate this light. It is love that has understood that this flicker of transcendent light is in fact altogether potent and dispels even the darkest darkness and that it cannot be extinguished by the darkest darkness.

Mercy thus manifests to the world the birthing of God in creation. In Mercy we are caught up into this birthing in all of its risk and possibility, in all of its sweat and labouring, in all of its agony and delight. This is the Mercy in the heart of Mary –she who brings forth the life of Jesus at his birth, but who now gives birth in a new, even deeper, way at his death. The birthing of the new life released by Jesus self surrender at Calvary begins in grief - grief for what has been lost, grief for what could be but which is obstructed by negative forces. Mary is the one who remembers, pondering all things in her heart.

Grief and memory are integrally linked. Metz declares that,
the memory of suffering [is] our critical tool for survival . . . The Christian memory of suffering is dangerous because it warms us where things have gone wrong and challenges our comfort in the official story. The memory of suffering, our own and especially that of others, connects each with the other and provides a practical warning system about distorted relationships, institutions and situations. . . And this memory impels us to a solidarity with victims.¹

In Mercy, grief and memory thus combine to form what Metz calls a political spirituality: Christian witnessing to God is guided through and through by political spirituality, a political mysticism. Not a mysticism of political power and political domination, but rather – to speak metaphorically – a mysticism of open or opened eyes. Not only the ears for hearing, but also the eyes are organs of grace! . . . In the end Jesus did not teach an ascending mysticism of closed eyes but rather a God-mysticism with an increasing readiness for perceiving, a mysticism of open eyes, which sees more and not less.²

¹ John K. Downey, "Introduction," *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, edited by John K. Downey, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 8.

² *Johannes Metz, A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, edited and translated by J. Matthew Ashley, (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1999), 163

This mysticism of open eyes awakens us as the heart of Mercy awakens us. But to what are we awakened?

Again, to turn to Metz:

It is a mysticism that especially makes visible all invisible and inconvenient suffering, and – convenient or not- pays attention to it and takes responsibility for it, for the sake of a God who is a friend to human beings. . . Such witnessing to God is not allowed political innocence. In the end, witness is intimately involved, with eyes that see, in that history where people are crucified and tortured, hated and miserly loved . . .³

We become awake to the pain of those suffering in South Hedland, Mt. Isa, in Mutujulu – the pain of all those who are too inconvenient for those with power and resource to take much notice. Grief greets us - if we look - in those parts of our own country in which the fog of hopelessness suffocates whole communities of indigenous people. It is there for us to hear in our own neighbourhood where people live lives of quiet desperation through the agony of loneliness, depression or tormenting physical and emotional pain. We hear the grief, too, of the planet struggling to breathe, and the dying Australian landscape now that the indigenous songlines are no longer preserved.

The heart of Mercy holds the agony of the world. We hold the agony of our own hearts. We hold our agony in the same way as Mary held the dead, lifeless body of Jesus taken from the Cross. We see that dead, abandoned body of Jesus in the world's agony now. We see the body of the crucified One in those whom the world has abandoned, in those parts of our own heart that are broken. We hold the body of the Crucified One when we hold the agony of those who are now crucified by the world's greed, by the world's neglect.

We hold the Crucified One.

With anxious, helpless ardour, like Mary the Mother of Jesus who holds her dead son in agony, with the heart of Mercy we gaze towards heaven, our hearts full of question. As we hold the agony of others and as we hold our own agony, we are full of question. And no answer comes. As for Mary as she held her dead Son, as for us, there is only Silence and our pain is felt only more.

Yet now, as on that first Good Friday, the Silence calls forth a depth of hope we barely imagined possible and our hope fills the Silence. It is our hope that fills the Silence. The heart of Mercy holds the world's agony but we also allow hope to rise in its hearts. It cannot avoid the question that it might be a hope in vain. In the face of what agony we encounter and that we bear, our hope is not given an easy, facile answer or consolation. We must wait in our hope.

³ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 163.

Yet, in our waiting a word comes to us. It is the word of memory – the memory that one man’s hope was not disappointed. In our own hope we remember the heart of hope that was in Jesus himself, a hope that rose in the Silence, and not without its waiting, was given its answer. In the story of Jesus’ own agony, in the story of his own hope, we are ultimately reminded that our hope is not in vain.

For in the story of Jesus our hope has been given a Promise. Our hope is not in vain. Thus our agony is not the tomb in which we are consigned to remain trapped forever and in which we must despair. In Christ, even in the midst of the world’s agony, our hope becomes the avenue into an unimagined possibility.

Thus mercy transforms grief into hope. Mercy is thoroughly paschal in character. It looks squarely at death and affirms life, it looks at absence and proclaims presence; it stands at dead ends and celebrates new beginnings. Mercy is the midwife delivering hope from the body of grief.

The heart of Mercy is the one, who has listened ever so deeply, reverently and attentively to the true situation of people and spoken out a word in which the people can recognise their truth. The voice of Mercy speaks out a word which, because it captures the truth of people, seizes their imagination and invites them into a new way of living, and onto a pathway which will not rob them of their humanity but which offers them fresh and constructive means of living out their humanity with one another. The voice of Mercy does not condemn. Rather, it invites, it opens up new vistas, new horizons for the imagination. It does not tell people what they should be doing. It invites them to wonder how they could be.

Let me recount for you one of my favourite little stories that, I believe, has much to teach us about such a transformation.

It is Belsen, 1945. A concentration camp toward the end of the war. Miriam lives in Hut 18, bed 22. She and all her friends are hungry and are dreaming of how wonderful it would be to eat chicken again. Little Sarah and David are among her companions. They are only four years old and have known no other home. Unlike Miriam they have never known a proper bedroom or what it is to have toys. And so Miriam and the other women plan a special party. As she claims, “When the soldiers come to set us free - and they are coming soon, everyone says so! - they will open the gates. And for dinner we will cook chickens, chickens for everyone! - and each child in the hut will get a toy. A toy of their own.” Miriam and the women get busy making toys, collecting bits and pieces. Scraps of material, rags, tiny strands of thread, wool, anything. They cut and sew every night while the guards sleep. The soldiers do come and liberation dawns. Miriam and the women bring out the toys and they have their party.⁴

⁴ This story comes from Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas, *Let the Celebrations Begin*, and is a recollection of Dr Hadassah Rosensaft, from Brewster Chamberlin and Marcia Feldman, eds, *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945: Eyewitness accounts of the liberators* (United States Holocaust Memorial Council, Washington DC, 1987).

This is a story of liberation, a story of joy, a story of humanity. She and the other women in the camp lived on a word of hope. "The soldiers are coming!" They would soon be free. Where this word came from we are not told. How reliable this word might have been we have no idea. But the word of possible liberation enabled these captive women to live very differently from how they had up until this word was announced to them. The word of hope which filtered through to them through the barbed wires enabled them to be reckless, to forget a life of mere survival and to begin to entertain the idea of celebration. The word of hope helped them to re-order their priorities. It gave them the freedom already to delight in life, to care more fully for each other and to create beauty in the midst of their poverty and misery. In the midst of agony, the word of hope enabled them to laugh.

It is amazing what a word of hope can do for people who are otherwise trapped.

We too have been given a word of hope. And that word is Jesus. It is a word of hope in that for us it is a word which says it all. It is the single word which reminds us deep in our hearts that forgiveness is stronger than vengeance, that love is more enduring than hatred, that hope is brighter than despair, that life is stronger than death. As people of Mercy we are the people who live by this hope. We are the people to whom this hope has been entrusted. . That hope will enable us to act differently than the predicted concerns of the world dictate to us. And that hope leads us into a life of celebration. It is a celebration of the freedom we have now because of that hope, of the beauty that we can create now because of that hope, and of joy that we can share now because of that hope.

Sisters, may Mercy live in our hearts as it lives in the heart of Mary whose passion draws us into itself that we too might birth the divine life into the world.