

Mercy Day Rice Village 2017

This text is a modified version of a talk presented to residents and staff at Mercy Place, Rice Village, Geelong, Victoria, to celebrate Mercy Day 2017. Rice Village comprises a large aged care facility, providing low and high care and a memory support unit, as well as a large number of independent living units on the same site. A number of Sisters of Mercy are residents.

Good morning, and thank you for the invitation to share some thoughts about Mercy in this special environment of Mercy Place Rice Village. A special hello to those watching via closed circuit TV in other parts of the building, in addition to those here present in the chapel.

I am going to reflect today on some aspects of Mercy through the words of a poem I wrote a couple of years ago. The poem is printed in the back of your Mass booklet and is called the *Door of Mercy*.

You may recall that the Pope, with great ceremony, opened one of the great doors at St Peter's in Rome to signify the commencement of the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016. This set me thinking about the many doors that we go through each day, some more grand than others. It set me thinking about what metaphorical features a door of mercy would have- what values we would hope to find when we cross the threshold of a Door of Mercy. And so the poem started to form in my mind. You might like to think of the doors you go through each day as I talk, where they lead to and from, and who or what you meet there. What you bring and what you receive.

Now, there are two ways I want to share thoughts about this poem with you. One is the poem as you see it on the page; the other, which I will get to in a little while, is a story hidden within or behind the poem.

I wrote the poem to try and capture different aspects of Mercy:

- Firstly, Mercy is a quality of God- it is not something *we* own, or that we *do* – it belongs to God, comes from God, and leads to God. The last line of the poem expresses this: the door belongs to God, and to the extent that we act within the spirit of God's mercy then we too are merciful. Parts of the Old Testament emphasise very poignantly God's fidelity and loving kindness, the forgiveness and tenderness that God displays towards us. This is the Mercy we want to ponder today.
- One of the strong themes that emerged when I was writing the poem is that Mercy is always an exchange, a dynamic. It is never about one person doing something for another, giving to another in a one-sided arrangement. Mercy is really the energy that ensues, the mutual dynamic that is created, in the exchange of loving kindness. So, if you are a carer looking after an unconscious dying resident the Mercy is in the subtle two-way dynamic, not just in your giving or helping. As the poem says, "*Blessing is for all... helper and helped, all belonging, each bestowing.*"

- The poem describes some of the symbolic aspects of the door:

*Its single key is kindness,
which is always in the lock.
Faithfulness is its lintel...*

I chose those words very carefully, because I believe Mercy is always about kindness and faithfulness. Our founder Catherine McAuley once gave instructions in a letter, dated July 1837, about the care of a sick Sister. Apart from some practical advice, her main instruction was: “great tenderness of all things.” That is, not as it is sometimes quoted “great tenderness *in* all things...” which would be a fine directive, but no, “great tenderness *of* all things: that is, above all else, more important than all else, is tenderness towards the sick, the dying and the frail. Those words still hold true today, I think you will agree.

The word faithfulness seems a very important one also when we speak about Mercy. It is lovely of course to celebrate in a special way today, but the work of Mercy in this place goes on *every* day: in the laundry delivery, the maintenance workers on a repair mission, the person who smiles at you at the kiosk. Mercy stays for the hard slog, the good days and the bad. Mercy puts up with, and forgives.

- Please indulge me in a brief digression. In her book *The Blessing of Mercy*, Sr Veronica Lawson writes about agents of Mercy- those objects or non-human creatures and gifts of nature that bring healing and restore the spirit. One of the heroes of the Memory Support Unit over in St Joseph’s House 3 is the big black and white cat, RV. His influence for good is beyond measuring. I would invite you to consider the non-human agents of Mercy that lift your spirit. Over the twenty years since Rice Village was established, the gardens here have grown to be a beautiful display, as well as a haven for birds. Your agent of mercy today might even be the walking frame or stick that helped you get here!
- One of the things I wanted to write in the poem was that we cross the threshold of the Door of Mercy every day. Every door, every day. It’s about welcoming in a neighbour; it’s about visiting a friend who has become too frail to be out and about. It’s about the husbands and wives who go each day, day after day, through that secure door of the Memory Support Unit to sit with their loved one who may not even recognise them.

So, they are some of the ideas about Mercy that are clearly held in the metaphor of the Door of Mercy. But behind the poem that I wrote, is a hidden story. When I was preparing the poem, I wrote the first draft but I wasn’t entirely happy with it.

I talked to my friend Patricia. I said to her, “Come on Pat, give me some ideas about the Door of Mercy. I just need something to give the poem a bit of a lift.” Pat replied immediately: “Oh, the Door of Mercy- well, you only have to knock once, and you only have to knock lightly.” You only have to knock once, and you only have to knock lightly.

That is the God Pat believes in- the God who is always home, waiting to welcome and shelter us. This is not the idolatrous god with a small g that some of us may still hold in our heads- this is not god the vicious accountant, not god the punitive judge who fills us with dread, not God the high-handed moralist waiting to pounce. This is God with a capital G, the generous and attentive host, expectant and eager for our approach.

By itself Pat’s response made a fine contribution to the poem. But, the hidden facts are these. My friend Sr Pat Kenny, who is a Sister of Mercy in Adelaide, is 90 years old. She has Alzheimer’s Disease, which mostly affects her short-term memory, but is now eroding some of her other functioning as well. The world is for her increasingly a confusing and bewildering place. When she came out with that response about the Door of Mercy, I was amazed, and it taught me once again never to discount the capacity of someone with Dementia, nor for that matter to underestimate someone just because they have gone beyond their allotted years of three score and ten.

This month of September, as well as holding the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy, is Dementia Awareness Month, and I wanted to share that story partly to show that the poem was stronger because of Pat’s contribution, a contribution from someone battling a terrible disease. Had I not asked Pat the question, she would not have revealed her marvellous answer. Sadly, in my experience, what tends to happen when people have dementia is that we exclude them subtly from conversations, or we are perhaps too scared or embarrassed to engage with them. If the question had not been asked, the answer would have remained locked in her deteriorating brain tissue. I thank God her answer escaped, and that her words have gone around the world and been used in many situations. It makes the poem very important to me: that a crucial part of it was given by a frail aged woman who despite her diminishment is still mindful of Mercy.

Five years ago, at the age of 85, Pat completed thirty years of managing a community of homeless and addicted people, called Hesed, the Hebrew word for Mercy. Today, she would be hard pressed to tell you what she had for breakfast, or indeed whether she had breakfast at all. Perhaps I should mention that when I asked Pat whether I could share some of her story for this occasion, she said, “of course, if it helps someone else. It may help them to understand.”

Just because a person has Dementia does not mean they have lost their wisdom, or their spiritual identity. I have come to think of dementia as more like a revolving door than a steep downhill slope. It is terrible disease, but it is amazing what comes in and out, back and forth. The key for us as friends and carers is to be there in the talk and in the silence. People with dementia need us to spend time with them, to include them where possible, to hold their

memories for them, and deal gently with how they are now in the passage of their disease. In a way we take on the memory of the person, and a large part of our care is re-minding.

And of course we already do that to a degree, but maybe we could each consider how we might do it more consciously with the two-way mutual blessing of Mercy in mind, and overcome some of our own fear or embarrassment.

Let's come back to that image of the Door of Mercy. You might like to think about where the ordinary everyday experience of Mercy graces your life, and ask where the unexpected experience of Mercy waits for you: perhaps in risking an encounter, or acknowledging a blessing from someone or something you normally would not see in that light.

In conclusion, there is a lovely little poem by an Irish priest named Padraig Daly that I'd like to share with you.

The poem is called simply *God*:

All day long

She has been arranging our welcome:

scouring down the house,

sweeping under beds...

Shining glasses and tableware,

Dusting sideboards and picture frames.

Now she sits in a deep chair

Till we come crunching under the beech trees

To the door.

That door of course is a Door of Mercy. The door belongs to God, who is always home. Let us pray for one another, that we will continue to make Mercy together, and to experience Mercy in the dynamic created by mutual care and attention.

Mary Wickham rsm

The full text of the poem *The Door of Mercy* can be found on the next page.

THE DOOR OF MERCY

The Door of Mercy is double-hinged,
 swinging in, opening out,
 sturdy, yet easily moved.

My friend says: *You only have to knock once,
 and you only have to knock lightly.*

The Door of Mercy rests on the threshold of need.
 Its single key is kindness, which is always in the lock.

Faithfulness is its lintel,
 hope and healing the strong jambs either side.

The Door of Mercy might be splendidly red,
 it could be an unobtrusive brown.

It will need to be carefully handled
 and its fittings are locally sourced.

Mostly the Door of Mercy stands ajar.

In spirit and in flesh you cross its threshold each day,
 often unmindful, but sometimes,
 increasingly, amazed at its potent familiarity.

The smell of the food of home wafts out,
 the blood of the wounds of the earth flows in.

It is not immediately apparent
 which side is which of the Door of Mercy,
 since they interchange fluidly,
 pain and promise etched sharply on both.

Blessing is for all who come and go, stay and return,
 helper and helped,
 all belonging, each bestowing.

My friend says: *You only have to knock once,
 and you only have to knock lightly.*

The God of Mercy, whose door it is,
 is always home.