

Buffy sang about it; Roy Orbison purred over it; the hobbit - Bilbo Baggins - cried out for it during the Battle of the Five Armies; in 2015 Pope Francis inaugurated a Jubilee Year dedicated to it. The word I am speaking of is, of course, Mercy. It is a word that we use extensively in our liturgy and prayer life. We might cry out for it in moments of frustration; and we certainly appreciate it when we are on the receiving end. Our Lord taught it in a number of contexts, usually when forgiving sins, such as in the case of the woman who washed his feet with her tears: "she who is forgiven much, loves much".

Pope Benedict makes a beautiful contrast between the justice and mercy of God: "Mercy is what moves us toward God, while justice makes us tremble in his sight".

It is right and proper, therefore, that we begin each and every celebration of mass with an appeal to mercy (sadly in its shortened form): *Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy*. It sets the scene for the opening act of the liturgical drama: we have asked for God's forgiveness in confession, and we reinforce that need for reconciliation by this short litany. This is the oldest part of the mass text, retaining the original Greek. It is a linguistic link with the writers of the New Testament, and takes us beyond our own contemporary postmodern world, to the life of the primitive Church, who had to rely on God for everything. Our current culture is one of growing independence and materialism; planet-centred ethics, but narcissistic also. We have become a people who set great store upon our own efforts and self-reliance, or we let the state step in and take over. God has very little

place in the consciousness of 21st century life, even if we vaguely assent to his existence.

One of the most dramatic parables of mercy in the New Testament is that of the Good Samaritan (St Luke chapter 10). Jesus is breaking down both religious and sectarian barriers; between the people of the Northern kingdom of Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah. One nation under God, who had once been united, had become bitter enemies and were hostile to one another. When Jesus asks the lawyer which of the three men acted most like a neighbour, he could not but answer - the Samaritan. He was the one who showed great mercy and generosity of heart. The punchline: "Go thou and do likewise" draws each of us into the scene. We are called to be merciful, just as God has promised to be merciful to us if we ask him from our hearts. All of our encounters with other human beings creates for us a challenge: whether they are family, friends, work or school colleagues, or those we encounter in our daily lives. By our words and actions; our neglect of their circumstances; by our self-imposed business, we can sin against our neighbour and cause them harm. We ask God in the Lord's Prayer to "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us". We have to respond in kind. Showing mercy in love to our neighbour is not an option, if we expect it ourselves.

There is another reason for this: our encounters with the 'other' - the person confronting us, or asking for mercy - is a unique individual, as I have said now several times from this pulpit. The physicist and cosmologist - Carl Sagan - once said, "Every one of us is, in the cosmic

perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another". When we ask for mercy from God, we acknowledge his unique presence in and beyond the universe. When we show mercy to another, we do so to one who is uniquely loved by God, just as we are. As we weekly reflect on the person of Jesus in the gospels, look out for those episodes of mercy and transformation. Learn to imitate them in your own lives, and you will see the world change before your eyes.