

Second Sunday of Easter, Year C (Divine Mercy)

Acts 5:12-16

Ps 118

Rev 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19

John 20:19-31

Today we reach the end of the Easter Octave—the “eighth day” that we hear spoken of in the Gospel—and we celebrate this conclusion of the greatest feast of our year with a focused meditation on the mercy of our Lord, whose unearned love for us is so great that he endured a brutal passion and death to win our freedom from sin and death.

William Shakespeare famously wrote about the quality of mercy in his play *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the character Portia notes that mercy is “an attribute of God himself,” which drops like a gentle rain from heaven, seasoning justice, and revealing genuine strength. She also speaks of mercy as being “twice blest,” blessing both the one who is merciful and the one who is shown mercy.

We certainly see the effect of the Lord’s mercy on the Apostles following the Resurrection. Indeed, the transformation that we see in their lives is one of my favourite things about the Easter season. These men who consistently missed the point while Jesus was alive, and then all ran for cover as he was being sent to his death, and finally hiding behind closed doors after the fact – these same men suddenly burst forth into a hostile world with overflowing joy and heretofore unseen courage.

I most especially love the transformation we see in Simon Peter, whose dramatic failure during our Lord’s passion might easily have sent him on a downward spiral similar to that of Judas. As we know, the risen Lord would give him three chances to say “I love you”, and in so doing wash away the shame of his threefold denial.

You could argue that being the recipient of such unearned mercy and forgiveness from the Lord was a prerequisite for taking on the responsibility that Peter was subsequently entrusted with. As the leader of the early Church—the first pope, as we would now describe him—it’s easy to see how such a role could have tempted him towards feelings of pride and arrogance. But how could Peter ever be arrogant, when everyone knew what he had done?

It’s almost as though God, in his providence, allowed Simon Peter to go through his harrowing roller-coaster of betrayal and forgiveness so that he could approach the leadership that was being asked of him with humility. The unearned mercy he received from the Lord would always be front and centre, giving concrete impetus to Jesus’ teaching that Christian leadership must always take the humble posture of one who serves.

The fact that God could still use the Apostles as such key instruments in his mission, despite their weakness—and perhaps even because of it—is a tremendous consolation for us when we find ourselves in the midst of struggles, or being all-too-aware of our sinfulness. God can use our trials and weakness just as he used theirs, as reminders of our ongoing need of him, and to help keep us from pride when things start going well.

In a meditation on St Peter's redemption and subsequent role within the early Church, Pope-emeritus Benedict once described the Church as having been in a real sense "founded upon forgiveness". Having experienced the Lord's mercy so comprehensively, the Apostles are then sent out to share the tremendous Good News they have received – the mind-blowing revelation that God is more on our side than we are on our own side, that we need never be afraid, and that Christ's death and Resurrection have won everlasting freedom from the powers of sin and death.

The Apostles would witness to this new and completely unearned freedom—which even prison and death could not diminish—and in so doing aided the great outpouring of the Spirit onto the world. Through the great cloud of witnesses, this Good News has been passed down through the ages, and two-thousand years later, you and I have had the privilege of being baptised into it. We probably struggle to fully believe it at times, or to live out its radical implications for our lives, and yet here we are, gathering in our Lord's name and around his altar nonetheless.

This is a place where we are invited to come apart from the world to gather as a community of faith, to give the Lord the praise that is his due, to reunite with our Lord in the sacraments, to support each other as we strive to trust the Lord in all things, and then—like the Apostles—to be sent forth from here to witness to the Lord in our day-to-day lives, and to serve him in our neighbour.

This is a responsibility, but it is also a tremendous privilege, one which we have received as a pure gift. And we have received this gift from the Lord, of course, but we have also received it from those who have gone before us in faith, and upon whose shoulders we stand. Countless generations of faithful have toiled before us so that you and I might know the risen Lord, and be able to gather to worship him and to be nourished by his sacraments.

And we have a responsibility to pay it forward—to be good stewards of what has been passed onto us—both by witnessing to those around us who don't yet have the blessing of knowing the freedom offered by Christ, and also to strive to pass this faith onto the generations who will come after us. We are called to do this first and foremost through the witness of Christian love in our lives. But there is also a need for us to offer concrete support for the material needs of our local Church.

Every Christmas we celebrate how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and, ever since, the Lord's Church has dwelt among the flesh and bone of our day-to-day world. We are part of the Lord's Body here and now, in our homes and in this parish. And just as a human body has day-to-day needs of food, shelter, clothing, etc, so our

parish has day-to-day needs of providing for our liturgies, maintaining buildings, paying wages and bills, and financially supporting our efforts at proclaiming the Gospel.

The Body needs physical, as well as spiritual, care. And so the Church invites us to reflect from time-to-time on how we might be called to assist our parish in her mission at this stage in our lives – certainly with our prayer, with our witness and service, if possible with our time volunteering in some capacity, and as appropriate with our finances as well.

This is not my parish, or even the Archbishop's parish – it is the Lord's parish, and we are each invited to take responsibility for ensuring that it can be a place where the Good News of the Lord's mercy is proclaimed to all, and where all are invited to share in the new life that burst forth from the empty tomb.