WROCŁAW

Monday December 14, 2015

Last Tuesday Pope Francis solemnly opened the Jubilee Year of Mercy which will last until the feast of Christ the King next year (Nov 20, 2016). He opened the great door at the entrance to St Peter’s which is only opened in jubilee years. The open door is a powerful symbol for God’s mercy. It makes God’s invitation visible: **enter in here, and receive the mercy of God.**

The opening words of Pope Francis’s letter officially announcing the Year of Mercy have these striking words: “**Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy.**” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 1).

Mercy is not just a theological concept, not just a beautiful and comforting idea. It is not theoretical. It has been made real and visible in Jesus, the beloved Son of the Father. If you want to know God’s mercy, read the Gospels. Often theologians go first to the epistles, which are more teaching documents. But to know Jesus, to be exposed to His influence, to become his follower, go to the Gospels. There we see God’s mercy enfleshed in the life, the gestures and words of Jesus.

Let us look briefly at a few examples:

John 4, the story of the woman at the well in Samaria. She has had five husbands and the man she is living with is not her husband. A disgraced woman. But Jesus initiates the contact: he asks her for a drink. And this opens the door and Jesus speaks to her about the living water that he can give.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). A man has two sons. The younger demands his share of the inheritance immediately. He then leaves his father, ignores his wishes, and wastes all his inheritance in dissolute living. Finally, he ends up in desperate need. The text says “he came to his senses” at last, and decides to go back to his father. One fascinating detail in this story says, “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him, was filled with compassion and ran to embrace him. This is the picture Jesus gives of his heavenly Father, of his great mercy. When we sin, he is looking out, longing for our return. The Father longs to embrace us again. The older brother who had remained home with his father did not learn from the father; he is angry and indignant that the Father shows mercy to his fallen brother.

A very different example from Luke 19, Zacchaeus, the tax collector, a servant of the Roman occupying power, despised by loyal Jews. He climbs a tree to see Jesus. Jesus comes, sees Zacchaeus, picks him out, and says: “I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19: 5). A different kind of disgraced person. So the guardians of morality say: “he has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner” (Luke 19: 7). Yes, because Jesus reveals the face of God’s mercy. “for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19: 10).

Blind beggar, Bar-Timaeus, shouts out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (Luke 18: 39). Those in front rebuke him. But Jesus stops for Bartimaeus!

We often find two opposed attitudes among people concerning mercy. There are some who do not see their need for mercy. They are satisfied, even proud of their performance. These were the only category of people for whom Jesus had harsh words: those who are self-righteous, the “perfect” having no need of forgiveness. The publican in Luke 18: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even this tax collector.” (Luke 18: 11). He does everything right, but his heart is all wrong.

The opposite to this self-righteousness is the person who cannot forgive themselves. I am too bad. I cannot forget the big sin I committed. This is the first step in receiving God’s mercy. We must have mercy on ourselves. We have to forgive ourselves. Stop beating ourselves. Nothing is too bad for Jesus to forgive. It is a perverted form of pride that blocks us.

When we confess our sins and we receive absolution, we must receive the forgiveness. That means believing we are completely forgiven. When God forgives us, it means that when God looks at us, He no longer sees that sin. So in the Mass we proclaim “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.” He truly takes away our sin. So it is wrong to hold on to it when Jesus comes to take it away.

First, then receiving God’s mercy. Secondly, we show mercy to others. If you want to know one of the surest roads to heaven, look at the Beatitudes. Here Jesus says: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.” (Matt. 5: 7). If we show mercy, we shall certainly receive it.

How merciful are we to others? Is there anyone I haven’t forgiven? Anyone I feel I can’t forgive? Someone in the family? A former business partner? Against a partner in marriage? You will have peace until you can forgive from your heart. This is equally true when you were deeply offended against. Year of Mercy.

Then more widely, are there categories or groups of people to whom I am closed? About whom I just repeat negative things? Gypsies, refugees, Jews, Muslims, drug addicts, beggars on the street?

Any problems with the Church, with priests? Maybe I stay away from confession because of a bad experience. Injuries we hold on to! Mercy!

Pope Francis emphasizes the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; clothing the naked; welcoming the stranger; healing the sick; visiting the imprisoned; burying the dead. (*Misericordiae Vultus*, para. 15). All except the last are taken from the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, the judgment scene when the king separates the wicked from the righteous. “I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” When you did this, Jesus says, you were doing it to me. When we refuse to do these things, we refuse to do them to Jesus.

Whenever we perform works of charity, whenever we exercise these works of mercy, we are showing the world the face of Jesus. We are demonstrating the reality of God’s mercy. Here we connect with the theme for tomorrow’s message on the New Evangelization.

Thank you for your attention.