

TALK FOR RETREAT DAY

HOLY YEAR OF MERCY

I remember 45 years ago being in the School library and finding a 'Discovery Folder' all about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I was intrigued by how someone so powerful and seemingly so popular could be murdered when out in a car with his wife, going through the City of Dallas.

John F. Kennedy was a baptised Catholic. He apparently went to Mass and was honoured by the Vatican with an audience with the Pope, I think, John XXIII. But laterally, it has transpired that he was reputedly unfaithful to his wife. What about his likely assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald; was he a licensed killer, and the one who shot him? Jack Ruby – what was his moral or immoral position? The truth is that humanity is a construct of the complex overtures of passion, power, ambition and vengeance.

As St Paul reminds us we are all sinners and he sees himself as one of the greatest. But he is connected to Christ, who as he writes so beautifully in Ephesians Chapter One, he now lives under his authority and kingship.

To be a president, a king or leader is presumably an awesome responsibility. There is temporal authority – just as I have mentioned. Then, there is spiritual authority. Jesus lives under the temporal authority of King Herod Antipas, a puppet King and Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor. But Jesus himself is the eternal merciful King.

Herod and Pilate are weak rulers caught up in a political pressure of intrigue, contradiction, lies and fear. Herod is fearful and respectful of John the Baptist, but then under pressure from his adulterous 'wife' – shows him no mercy.

Pontius Pilate is facing Jesus at the Praetorium and has him on trial. He can find no case against him, but lacking courage to be merciful, he washed his hands of him and hands him over to be crucified. I have shared with you the trial and death of John the Baptist; the trial and death of Jesus, devoid of mercy – an opportunity for mercy extinguished by false kingship.

In contrast to this, as Pope Francis teaches us in 'Misericordiae Vultus': the mercy of God is brought to light through our faith in Christ Jesus. As St John says, to have real faith you must have mercy and love for your brother, otherwise it is not true faith.

The sacramental life of the Church, through the Holy Spirit, is built on the premise of saying yes to faith, yes to mercy; yes to this mutual relationship of love. For instance when we are baptised, the solemn oath is invited of us to reject sin and evil, thereby be merciful and love the Trinitarian God and His Church.

The Sacrament of Confession is that definitive moment of contrition and absolution, thereby experiencing the mercy of God in the Apostolic exhortation of Jesus to baptise the nations and forgive sins.

The Sacrament of Confirmation is a recognition of receiving the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and the seven fruits of the Holy Spirit, including 'understanding', 'right judgment', 'knowledge', 'kindness', 'gentleness' and 'patience'. All spiritual qualities that help us to bring the reality of mercy to fruition.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the glorious triumph of God's mercy over sin and death. The Eucharist is the sacred celebration of the healing covenant between God and the world. As Jesus says, 'Be reconciled, then come and sit down with me at table'. We say at every Mass: 'Lord I am not worthy to have you under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed'.

The Vocational Sacraments of Marriage and Priesthood are called by Jesus to unitive sacramental life-long commitments. We promise when we take our vows that we will be unitive in what we do in marriage, by love, repentance and mercy to protect the loving union of husband and wife. In holy priesthood, by being a true disciple of Jesus that we will bring healing and unity to our parish faith communities; that the pastoral role of the priest is as Jesus taught us, to be a faithful shepherd of the flock, leading the sheep to good pasture; leading the people of God, under the authority of Christ's Kingship towards the Kingdom of Heaven. That means teaching the faith, celebrating the Sacraments and bringing the lost sheep back to the fold.

The Sacrament of Healing and Departure is the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick. That is the latter stage of our life on earth. God's mercy is still abundantly made present by the anointing with the oil of infirmorum; the Eucharist as food for the journey and the praying of the litany of the saints.

President John F Kennedy; Queen Victoria; Fidel Castro; General Franco; Colonel Gadaffi; Saddam Hussain; we will never know truly how moral or immoral those temporal rulers have been. It is for God to judge them all in their entirety. In view of that, we must recognise that not all humanity will value or appreciate acts of mercy.

There is a memorial stone on the beach of Anzio, Italy to a dead Nazi soldier, who saved the life of a little girl on the beach as the 'Allied Forces' attacked with bombs and bullets. His act of mercy was remembered, even if the ideology he stood for was seen as immoral and evil. Let us be reminded that the problems of this world will be caused by 'great men and women' who, when evil occurred, stood back and did nothing.

**'Lord, help me to be merciful as you are merciful.
Our Lady of Mercy, Pray for us'.**

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Imagine you are at the scene of the stoning of the woman caught committing adultery. You notice a commotion; you've seen a prostitute lying on the ground, afraid. A crowd is all around her – some holding stones in their hands.

Jesus is crouching on the ground, seemingly writing in the sand with his finger. What do you think? The woman has sinned, should she be punished? What about the crowd around her? Should the one's holding stones be punished? When or can a punishment fit the crime? Is the King of the Jews, the eternal king's way of showing mercy alien to our own?

Jesus says, 'neither do I condemn you, go on your way and sin no more'.

Mercy without punishment, can we embrace it and be a changed person?