



**Malahide and Portmarnock Ecumenical Committee**  
**BROTHER, SISTER, LET ME SERVE YOU**

Speaking notes of  
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Saint Andrews Parish Church (C of I) Malahide, 17 February 2016

In the Roman Catholic Church we are celebrating this year what we call an “Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy”. It is an event through which Pope Francis wishes to restore the concept of mercy and compassion to a central place in the life of the Church. Some of the ceremonial of the Jubilee may seem a little strange to those of you not familiar with the tradition of the Catholic Church. Holy Doors and Indulgences may well be hard for men and women of a Protestant tradition to understand.

What is vital however is to remember that Jesus Christ alone is the door of mercy. He is the one who shows us what mercy is and shows us how to be merciful. We can never define mercy simply in human terms. The mercy which Jesus reveals to us is of a different kind.

There are some who do not like the word mercy. It seems to them as somehow condescending. They say that people want justice and personal fulfilment and to realise themselves, rather than be the recipients of someone else's mercy.

But that is to misunderstand what mercy is. Mercy is an attribute of God. We see that right throughout the history of salvation. God treated his people with mercy and compassion even when they were unfaithful.

God is the one who knows us in the depths of our being. He knows the goodness that is in us and he knows the other darker dimensions of our lives, those dimensions which we hardly recognise ourselves or would not wish to recognise. God knows even our most secret sins. If we set out with the idea that our God is a harsh unforgiving God, we will remain closed in our sinfulness or with a blemished and imperfect sense of our own integrity, which will never allow us to be fully the person we can and want to be.

God does not wish us remain in such a confused and troubled state. Our God is a God who forgives and

reconciles and heals. His mercy is different to the calculated and measured and conditional mercy of our hearts. God's mercy can change us and bring our hearts to fulfilment through us experiencing mercy and then becoming loving and merciful people.

At the beginning of the first interview which Pope Francis gave shortly after his election, he was asked by the interviewer, fellow Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro: "who exactly is Jorge Mario Bergoglio". The Pope's instant answer was: "I am a sinner". Then he paused and said: "Let me reflect on that". "No", he said, "that is correct, I am a sinner".

In many ways this is one of the most fundamental insights we have into who this Pope is. It is the key to understanding many of his phrases. One who considers himself in the first place a sinner cannot be arrogant and harsh in his judgement of other sinners.

"Who am I to judge?" was the phrase he used when he was asked about a priest who was accused of homosexual behaviour. To many this seemed to be saying that the

Church was about to change its teaching. Pope Francis is certainly not one who sets out to change teaching; but he is one who wishes to reach out and accompany men and women no matter who they are or what they do. He said recently that when he visits a prison he always asks himself “why these men and women and not me”. And he attributes his fortune, not to his own merits, but to the fact that God had shown him mercy.

To another person who had fallen into a difficult situation which gained wide publicity he said: “the whole world knows of your sins; but they do not know mine”. If you understand God’s mercy in that way then you will never be judgemental with those who have fallen or arrogant in presenting even difficult and demanding teaching.

The unjust servant in the Gospel (Matthew 18:21-35) received mercy, only to go out and be harsher than ever before. We receive mercy so that we can be merciful. The Year of Mercy is an occasion for us to recall God’s mercy, but also the Year of Mercy is a call to the Church to renewal though being more and more a place where people can experience mercy and forgiveness and be a sign of

mercy within an often harsh and litigious world. Our secularised world can indeed be a very harsh and unforgiving world. Judgementalism will rarely lead to true conversion. Witnessing to God's mercy can touch hearts in a very different way.

Too many men, women and children in our day have not experienced the Church as harsh. Too many of us, believers and leaders in the Church, have been all too quick to change God's mercy into our prejudice and intolerance and our vindictive justice. We have been quick to judge. We easily consider ourselves better than others. We have created a harsh God and left the troubled scrupulous and guilt-ridden. We have been so concerned with the ninety-nine of our institutions and our like-minded that we have not only forgotten the one who was lost but we have antagonised and alienating them in their feeling lost or abandoned.

How do we as individuals and as a Church community incarnate the mercy of Jesus Christ in society today? As a Church we have to re-invent many of the aspects of our presence in society. We Catholics have even distorted that

great instrument of God's forgiveness, the Sacrament of Penance, into an invasive tribunal of judgement, rather than an opportunity to reflect on our lives in the context of a merciful encounter with Jesus Christ which liberates us. We have tried to restrict the boundless mercy of the God who awaits our return, into our categories of narrow justness.

There is one thing I believe that troubled people today - and not just troubled people - look for when they turn to us for help and for which we are becoming less and less fit-for-purpose in responding. It is a simple word: time. The troubled, the lonely, those who are searching, those who are mourning, those who are angry all seek the gift of our time. And we are becoming ever more busy! Time is measured however not just with a stop-watch. Having time is an attitude. Giving time is a gesture of respect to the other, allowing them the gift of time for themselves to change and convert. Giving time is a placing of ourselves on the same level as the other, rather than hastily either judging or imposing our solution to their problem or even running away as quickly as we can from engaging.

Giving our time means allowing the other to express themselves rather than us quickly putting them into one of our categories. The angry and the difficult need time, even if it may seem an uncomfortable use of time for us. In my work I have met with a very large number of men and women who have been abused by priests. They are often rightly angry and indeed very angry. But I can say that I have never come away from a meeting with any one of them without learning something new.

Giving our time is not always a question of hours. It can even be of a few seconds. When we see someone begging on the street we can pass by; we can throw some money in their direction; or we can simply say a few words to them and ask them are they all right, recognising them as a person.

One of the great images I think of about Pope Francis was when he was being driven around Saint Peter's Square and he noticed a man whose face was completely covered with sores. Pope Francis stopped and went over to the man. He did not ask the man or those who were with him what disease he had. He simply kissed him. There are so

many understandable ways in which we can ask questions around a person, rather than encountering them.

Mercy never imprisons; mercy never entraps us within ourselves; mercy frees. Mercy frees us not to remain in our selfishness but to become men and women of encounter, men and women of encounter who learn to rejoice in the joy of others and allow them to realise themselves.

But mercy is never cheap mercy; mercy is not superficial emotion. Mercy is neither compromise nor half-hearted repentance. Mercy frees us to journey towards true integrity in life. There is no such thing as 50% integrity. Mercy never dismisses the need to seek and live the truth and to change our lives. It is only in the context of mercy however that we can be accompanied on the path to the fullness of the truth of Jesus. The Year of Mercy is a gift of the Church to us in order for us to purify and renew our lives and our hearts and purify and renew the Church.

What is the spirit saying to the Churches today in this Year of Mercy about how we can be an oasis of mercy in a troubled world? There are two things I must always



remember when I begin to ask myself what the spirit is saying.

The first is that we will often ask that question “*What is the Spirit saying to the Churches*” and really come up with the answer to another question: “*what would I like the Spirit to be saying to the Church*”, then I end up with an answer which is about me rather than about the Spirit. To answer the right question we have to allow the Spirit to disarm us and that is not easy.

The second reason why this is a dangerous question is that if we allow the Spirit to disarm us then the answers that emerge may well be - not may well be, but inevitably will be - very different to what I think or expect and much more demanding than I am really willing to undertake.

The Spirit is dangerous because the Spirit is not the spirit of slavery but the spirit of freedom. And freedom is not doing what I like, but allowing the Spirit to come and shake me up and change me and make carry out a real “reality check”, not on others but on my own heart and my way of thinking, of living and of loving.

Where do I go personally when I want to see what the spirit is saying to me and to the Churches? I go back to those early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles where we have an almost direct indication of the things that the Spirit does to men and women when we allow the Spirit to enter into our hearts.

The first thing that the Spirit does is to change us. Here again let me be clear: when I say that the Spirit changes us, it must mean first of all that the Spirit changes me. Yes the spirit changes the Church, the community of believers in Jesus Christ, but the spirit does not leave me in the position of an observer on the outside, a remote and dispassionate much less a cynical commentator on how well others are doing.

Where do we see such direct action of the Spirit? We see it on the day on Pentecost when the frightened disciples went out on to the streets of Jerusalem and confidently addressed the cosmopolitan, diverse community that had gathered there. What did the Spirit inspire them to say?

“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know - this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power”

They previously frightened disciples out and did not comment generically on the challenges of the day: they preached the Good News of Jesus' Resurrection. How do we know that the Spirit is with us? The Spirit is with us and speaks through us when we speak words of Resurrection. Pope Francis writes:

“Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated the world. When all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection spring. In the midst of darkness something always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit. On

razed land life breaks through stubbornly yet invincibly”.

Archbishop McQuaid often told the story of how he had a path in his garden sturdily rebuilt and tarred and was proud of how clean and manageable it was. Then one day, as he was doing his regular walk what did he see: a beautiful, delicate tiny green blade of grass breaking through his sturdily built path. Resurrection breaks through stubbornly yet invincibly.

The Spirit speaks through signs of Resurrection. We Irish, myself included, have a great ability to identify what is going wrong. I had a friend who revelled in writing to me saying: “I am so happy to be able to tell you that things are even worse than we imagined”.

They are not words of resurrection, but we often fall into the temptation of feeling that change is impossible? We end up satisfied with doing little or nothing? We feel that situations are so complex that it is hardly worth making the effort. So often we end up responsible for situations where, to quote Pope Francis again:

“the Gospel, the most beautiful message that this world can be offered ends up buried in a pile of our excuses”.

The Spirit spoke to the Church at Pentecost. The Spirit also gave his disciples words and language that could be understood and appropriated by everyone who took the time to listen. We need to rediscover words and language of Resurrection.

The Spirit consolidated what happened at Pentecost through forming those early Church communities recoded in the Acts of the Apostles.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

When we speak words of resurrection and when we as the community of believers of Jesus Christ live resurrection then we truly evangelise.

When we find and use words and language of Resurrection, rather than our own futile words of analysis, then, as with the early Christian communities, we too will win the goodwill of all the people and day by day the Lord will add to our number.