

Mass at Farm Street Parish

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Given on Sunday 10 May, Sixth Sunday of Easter at the Immaculate Conception Church, Farm Street.

In our first reading this evening, we have heard these bold words of St Peter: 'God does not have any favourites, but anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God!'

What amazing words these must have been to their first hearers, a people schooled in the need to appease God, to conform, conscious of the various ways in which some were fiercely excluded from the community of faith. Perhaps these words are surprising to us in our day too.

These words are the prelude to a great opening of the community of Christians to those thought of as beyond its boundaries - the pagans. It becomes clear that an openness of heart is the key entry requirement for baptism and therefore onto the road of faith.

These words, these actions, are all the work of God's mercy.

Much is being said at this time about the mercy of God. It is held up by some as the aspect of our faith that will solve the painful dilemmas and ambiguities we face. So, with great attentiveness to our Holy Father, we are all to think deeply about what is meant by the mercy of God and about how it enters our lives and about all that this mercy asks of us. Perhaps we can make a small start this evening.

The mercy of God is the shape taken by God's love in the face of the mess we make of our lives and of our world. The love and mercy of God are inseparable. Both are shown in everything that God gives to us: our very existence, our faith, our vocation or calling in life, the commandments, the sacraments of the Church, the gift of prayer - all are rightly to be understood as the gift of God's mercy. Creation is God's first act of mercy: he has created me when there is no absolute need for me ever to exist; he has created me to know him, love him and serve him and to be happy with him forever. This is God's great mercy: that my life is not pointless, futile, as many secretly fear, but crowned with a most glorious destiny: to be with him for all eternity. The deepest desire of the Father's heart is that I achieve that glorious destiny. And to make that come about, God pours out upon me an endless stream of mercy, never tiring in his love.

St John tells us more about this work of God's merciful love. He writes: 'God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him ... who is the sacrifice that takes our sins away' (1 John 4.9). In the person of Jesus we see God's mercy fully revealed. In him we not only see our destiny spelt out in full, but also the remarkable way in which God makes it possible for us to attain that destiny. For each one of us Jesus is indeed our beginning and our end, our Alpha and our Omega.

In the Gospel passage we have just heard, St John opens for us the mind of Jesus. Jesus says to us: 'I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father.' And that 'everything' is made known, with absolute clarity, in his death and resurrection. We are called to share in that resurrection. This is the true purpose in life. This is the Father's plan. It is this that Jesus makes known: the true secret of our humanity, the essence of what it is to be a human being. Here we learn how truly to understand ourselves. And it is made possible by following the path and pattern of Jesus, receiving our victory through his death, resurrection, ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Only with this purpose and pattern at the centre of our minds do we understand the mercy of God. This

mercy is the force of love that wants to draw us, drag us, cajole us, inspire us to strive for our true destiny and never to be satisfied with anything less. God's mercy, then, above all else is God's call to us to turn again to him, no matter the mess we may be in. God's mercy draws our eyes beyond our self-centredness, our preoccupation with our own sense of being acceptable or accepted, to see again the glory that he has for us if only we would let him shape our lives afresh. God's mercy, in a word, is our opportunity for conversion.

There is so much more I would wish to say!

Those who counterpose the mercy of God and the commandments of God misunderstand both mercy and commandment. The commandments of God are given to us precisely as a mercy. They are not, in some strange way, more important than mercy. They are not rules imposed from the outside that above all else have to be obeyed. They are given to help us to live the pathway of our true dignity and highest calling. As Pope Francis says, commandments are not restrictions on our freedoms but indicators of our freedom. Understanding the true purpose of the commandment helps us to see how much we need God's mercy.

God's mercy is misunderstood if it is taken as something which enables us to overlook those commandments or somehow imagine that we are excused their calling. Rather it is the eternal restlessness of God's love calling us again and again to raise our eyes beyond the horizons we have set for ourselves, the limits of what we believe we can manage, the limits of what we think can reasonably be asked of us and to reach out again for the fullness of his love, opening our hearts again to its light and joy. Mercy enables us to start out again. It does not enable us to stop where we are, comfortable in a sense of being accepted just as we are.

Of course we are accepted. And of course we are disturbed, disturbed by God's love which is never quiet within us until it has truly filled and reshaped us. Let us never try to quieten the call of that great love!

There is a lovely, disturbing saying attributed to St Augustine which relates all this to the Eucharist, as many are striving to do so at present.

He says, as I recall, 'See on the altar the sacrament of who you are and of what you are to become.' Yes, this sacrament is a recognition and an affirmation of who we are: the body of Christ, striving to live according to his heart, his will, in pursuit of that full vision of our destiny laid out in the Paschal Mystery of his death and resurrection. The reception of Holy Communion affirms us in this and is received with integrity when this is our desire and the pattern of life for which we are actively striving. But the Eucharist is more, so much more. It is also and always the sacrament of our transformation, the sacrament of what we are to become. We can never receive Holy Communion with a good heart and a right intention unless we are willing to be changed, willing to be converted. Holy Communion can never be reduced to a sign or badge of acceptability, for it is always an invitation and a challenge to which we have to respond. If we are to receive the Eucharist faithfully and worthily, then we must be willing to be different, to be changed, everyone of us, by him whom we receive.

This is Eastertide, the continuing of the season of great joy and boundless hope. Today we rejoice again in the Resurrection of the Lord who triumphed over every obstacle that impedes us. The stone has been rolled back from the door of our tomb too. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead makes all the difference to the words he spoke to the woman caught committing adultery, words which are indeed a proclamation of mercy. But these words only reveal their full meaning when they are read in the light of the Lord's victory. 'Has no one condemned you?', he said. 'No one, Lord' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin again!' (John 8.10). This is the great story of God's mercy, not only freeing us from the burden of our sin, not only calling us to repent and be converted, but also, marvellously, making that conversion possible in our lives through his grace and presence with us always.

This is the mercy of God and truly for us it throws open the way forward! Alleluia! Alleluia!