

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (C)

6<sup>th</sup> December 2015

'Year of Mercy'

Bar 5: recovery of Jerusalem's glory after the exile Ps 125: *when the Lord delivered Zion from bondage ...* Phil 1: *Be pure and blameless for the day of Christ* Lk 3:1–6: *the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah*

This coming Tuesday — the feast of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception (8<sup>th</sup> Dec) — sees the opening of an extraordinary Holy Year. Usually Holy Years only occur on the years which are multiples of 25 (the first one was in 1300), and then also the years ending '33' and '83'. But Pope Francis has called for this extra Holy Year (2015–16) as a 'Jubilee of Mercy' — a chance for the Church to proclaim both to her own faithful, and to the world, the loving mercy, the merciful love, of God.

It is most fitting that the Holy Year of Mercy begins in Advent, and between these two Sundays (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays of Advent) when we are hearing the message and proclamation of St John the Baptist. John, as the Gospel tells us, "went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He stirred up the people's consciences as the time drew near for the Messiah to appear. His preaching

reminded them strongly that they were to examine their lives, and call upon the mercy of God. In this way he lived up to the expectations of his being a prophet to "prepare the way for the Lord ... make His paths straight." In other words, to help the people to have their hearts made clean, the way made clear, for Christ to enter in, when He came. In many ways, then, we can think of St John the Baptist as the first 'missionary of mercy,' or 'patron saint of forgiveness'! He is a wonderful figurehead to have before us as we enter into this 'Year of Mercy.'

The 'Year of Mercy' is meant to remind us all of our deep need for forgiveness; the fact that no sin is unforgivable if we turn to God again in penitence; and how we each need to recover strongly our use of the Sacrament of Confession. Maybe many people — inside the Church or outside — have this feeling that their sins are too great, or they are rejected by God for some reason. This 'Year of Mercy' is a way of receiving that loving message that none of us is outside His mercy. I love that phrase, which is in the prophet Joel, "The Lord your God is full of tenderness

and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent.” Throughout the Scriptures, this theme is repeated, time and time again. We cannot fail to hear it if we are listening for the voice of the Lord. But we need to be sure of it in our hearts; we need to live it and express it. This is why the Pope has called this special jubilee Holy Year, a year of grace. He says this:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives. For this reason I have proclaimed an *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* as a special time for the Church, a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.

(*Misericordiae Vultus* nn. 2–3)

So, whilst the ‘Year of Mercy’ will feature strongly over the next 12 months in the life of the Church, I want for now just to flag up a few things:

i. The ‘Pilgrimage Companion’ booklets that the

Cardinal has produced for our diocese for this year. They are very beautifully written, and are an attractive booklet (even though the cover is rather plain!).

- ii. Next Sunday I will begin Mass with the Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling of Water, connecting together the ongoing Advent attention to John the Baptist, reminding us of our own Baptism, and our personal need for mercy to cleanse us from our sins.
- iii. Also next Sunday, in the afternoon at the Catholic Church in Waltham Cross, Bishop Sherrington will be opening our local ‘holy door,’ echoing the opening of Holy Doors in cathedrals and churches across the whole world. Do please come and join him, and me, and other Catholics from the whole Deanery, to mark the start of the Holy Year together. (Or if you feel more adventurous, why not think of going up to Westminster Cathedral at the same time (3.30pm)?)
- iv. Then we need to make sure that we make use of Advent Penitential Services (here, Monday 21<sup>st</sup>, or elsewhere ... see Newsletter). There is no better celebration of mercy than the Sacrament of Reconciliation ... but more on that next Sunday ...