

4th Sunday (C)

31st January 2016

‘Corporal Works of Mercy’

Jer 1: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you Ps 71: from my mother’s

womb you have been my help 1Cor 12–13: Love is ...

Lk 4: 21–30: no prophet is ever accepted in his own country

There is such a rapid turn-around in Jesus’s fortunes in this Gospel passage. It follows on from the events of last week when Jesus stood up in his home synagogue and read a text about the Messiah from the prophet Isaiah, and then referred that prophecy to Himself: “this text is being fulfilled in your hearing.” They were taken aback at these words, but delighted that someone from their own town should be filled with such a mission from God. But by the end of today’s Gospel they have totally turned against Jesus, hustling Him out of the town in an attempt to kill Him. But it isn’t so much that aspect of the Gospel that I wish to focus on today. I would wish, rather, to continue the theme of the ‘Holy Year of Mercy’ that we thought about last week as Jesus announced that His ministry was to proclaim “the Lord’s Year of Favour.’

An important aspect of the ‘Year of Mercy’ is to recover a knowledge of, and the practice of, what have

traditionally been called the ‘corporal works of mercy.’ By that, is meant the bodily assistance that we can, and should, give, to others around us. We see, even in His first preaching at Nazareth, that Jesus mentions (i) saving the Sidonian widow from starvation by prophet Elijah; and (ii) healing Naaman from his leprosy by prophet Elisha. In fact, what seems to have angered His hearers at Nazareth was that Jesus reminded them authoritatively that these foreigners He mentioned were just as worthy of being fed and healed as the Jews. And that the Gospel, also, would be for all, not just for “the Chosen People.” Jesus’s foundation of Christianity makes an immediate insistence that we are diligently to perform works of mercy, for all, not excluding from our charity anyone whatsoever.

The Church usually lists the ‘seven corporal works of mercy’ as follows: (i) to feed the hungry; (ii) to give drink to the thirsty; (iii) to clothe the naked; (iv) to welcome the stranger; (v) to visit the sick; (vi) to visit the imprisoned; and (vii) to bury the dead. Most of these come from our Lord’s parable about ‘separating the sheep from

the goats' in Mt 25, His parable about the Last Judgment, and that we shall be judged on our works of mercy. So, before we enter Lent in a week or so, it would be good to think already about the charitable demands that are made on us by our faith. Do we “feed the hungry” etc.? What ways do we find, regularly, to carry out these works of mercy? “**Feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty**” starts at home, with hospitality to one another; it continues with our regular giving to the local FoodBank (our certificate of thanks to our parish, recently received, records that in 2015 we gave nearly a tonne of food). But it acquires a greater significance when we remember our starving brothers and sisters in war-torn and famine-ridden zones. We have many many ways of giving to *bona fide* charities that work to relieve hunger and poverty, and to provide clean, reliable drinking water. Obviously our own Catholic agency, CaFOD, does great work in this area, and we will be having our usual collection for their work early in Lent. What about “**clothing the naked**” and “**welcoming the stranger**”? Well, I have to say that you

were immediately very generous when it came to bringing in clothing to be sent on to the Calais refugee camp; and a few of us were privileged to help out at the local Winter Night Shelter in Enfield borough just a week or two back — if more opportunities arise with this venture, I will let you know. These actions are so important as a practical expression of our faith. “**Visiting the sick and imprisoned**” is also asked of us, that we do not flinch from going to places where we might rather not go. Please don't neglect your sick relatives and friends, whether in home or at hospital — they need you more than ever in their frailty. Don't give in to the myth that it's better to “remember them as they were”! In their fears around sickness they need the love of family most especially. Is there someone in sickness, at home or hospital that you should visit, or at least telephone, today? Finally, to “**bury the dead**” is the last of the corporal works of mercy. It's important that we give great dignity to the dying and the deceased. Let's not neglect or avoid those whom we know of to be coming towards the end of their life. Let's make sure that they

have all the dignity of medicine and homely comfort, and if they have need of a nursing home or hospice, let's be diligent about ensuring that their care is good. And when they do die, let's make sure that we always guarantee them a dignified, prayerful funeral — and if they're Catholics we should do all that we can to ensure that their funeral is held properly in Church, within a Requiem Mass. The remains of the deceased are then to be buried — either the body buried in a grave, or the ashes after a cremation also buried, and never scattered.

This is barely scratching the surface of what we all might do with regard to living generously the 'corporal works of mercy' — please, do let the Lord speak to your heart in regard to what you are doing, or should do extra, in these merciful actions. Let's not forget ... The merciful Lord *expects* us as baptized people of faith to be merciful; and He will judge us on it!