

15 March 2015

Mercy and grace are two strong themes in the writings of St Paul: it's here on display in today's second reading to the Ephesians but it characterizes most of Paul's other writings. Remember, Paul wasn't writing as a theologian or a temple official. Paul spent his time persecuting Christians and in fact enjoying it. But he heard the voice of the risen Lord calling him to conversion and a change of heart. Paul was overwhelmed by the grace and mercy of God from first-hand experience. And so, unworthy as he was, unworthy as we all are, Paul received from God this great gift of mercy and grace. And here we are on this fourth Sunday of Lent contemplating for ourselves the meaning of this gift in our lives, in the Church, given by Jesus from the cross.

The theme of mercy is the cornerstone of the pontificate of Pope Francis. In fact, yesterday the pope announced a Year of Mercy to begin in December this year. Pope Francis constantly draws attention to our merciful God, the pope is himself a merciful pastor, he calls all bishops, priests, religious and laity to be merciful in their lives. Like St Paul, Pope Francis should know. By his own admission, he has stated that when he was a young priest in charge of all the Jesuits in Argentina, he let power and authority go to his head. He was harsh, unfair judgemental towards many of his colleagues. He then realised that leadership demanded humility, tolerance, patience, forgiveness and understanding. That's why he calls all Christians to demonstrate these values and virtues in daily life. He calls the Church a field hospital full of the injured, the broken, those who struggle with the faith, those who have been hurt by the Church, those who suffer in many ways. And what these people need is not theology lectures or textbooks but an abundance of mercy, grace, healing, understanding and an open heart.

All this comes to us from the cross. The cross is the great sign of death, defeat and humiliation. But God raises up this cross to show his glory and mercy. God allows his Son to go the cross precisely to achieve the victory that many did not think possible. And from this cross comes an abundance of mercy. Here we see how much God loves the world, the grace of Jesus poured out to heal, to love, to cleanse and to set free. Lent is about coming into contact with the mercy of God. Lent is about softening our hearts and minds and souls to the power of God's word

that speaks to us and calls us to conversion. When Project Compassion reminds us of the poor and marginalized in our world, we come in touch with the richness of God's mercy. When we are dead through sin, God brings us to life in Christ. This is not a theory; St Paul knew about this reality in his life, Pope Francis has spoken quite openly and honestly about this reality in his own life.

Lent is about our journey of coming into contact with this God of mercy, grace, tenderness and love. And the journey is about growing ourselves in this grace so that we can be a sign to the world of the healing and the mercy Pope Francis wants us to demonstrate. It's very hard to be a witness to something we have not known or experienced ourselves. And so as we continue our Lenten season, let us pray for the grace to respond with courage and love to the God who is merciful, the loving God who sets our hearts free.