

Mercy Day, 24.09.2012, Baggot St, Dublin

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Readings:

First Reading – Ecclesiastes 3:9-12, 22

Second Reading – Catherine's letter to Frances Warde,
dated 2-3 Jan 1841, writing from Wexford

Gospel – John 19:25-30

The Readings we have just heard might provide us with a shorthand version of Catherine's life, of Mercy life. In my reflection I will avoid using quotations mostly as we all know many of them but just try to glean some grains to munch and enjoy today.

Like a best friend or a close relative, Catherine remains very dear to us, continues to amaze us, seems part of our own lives. Like knowing 'who you are' (TV programme on ancestry), knowing where you came from, knowing the genes that have been passed on to you, we know, as Mercy Sisters and Associates, that we have Catherine's spiritual DNA within us. Looking back over 180 years it is as if a helix strand of Mercy stretches back through each one of us, through the generations named in our archives below, to the nucleus that is her life and spirit. So we love Catherine, we know her and admire her, we take delight in what she achieved in a short religious life and passed on to us. Every so often we want to sit with her, and sensing her attentive presence, explore the questions and needs of our day; we want to share with her what we are engaged in when seeking to ease the pain of those excluded today; we want to talk about what troubles and concerns us now, and what makes us happy and want to dance for joy. Concretely, that desire (if it has any integrity) means that we want to sit with each other, aware of Catherine's presence, and explore and share together the problems and quandaries of our time; to discern the voice of need calling out to us, probe what troubles us in this 21st century, what makes us want to laugh and skip and make music in spite of our evident aches and pains!

Mary Sullivan's recent timely and scholarly biography of Catherine – *The Path of Mercy* – evoked for me a keen sense of the humanity and practicality of this lovely, warm-hearted, affectionate and faith-filled woman who is our Foundress, and whom we believe has an enduring influence in our lives, as much today as in the 1830s. Catherine's humanity is palpable on every page and seems to show that for her relationships come first every time, relationships characterised by respect, value, care, love and compassion and which come through her attitudes and concerns, her dreams and hopes. It was this humanity that would bring her to make concrete plans to give life and possibility to those relationships through teaching, training, comforting, sheltering, burying, sharing, advocating, building and expanding! The works of Mercy exactly! Mary Sullivan's study brings out how Catherine achieved this within the confines of her own limited reality, within circumstances beyond her control (as we all have), within the limitations of the early 1800s, within the vagaries of her own family circumstances, within the uncertainties of Church approvals or interventions. Reading her life afresh, she comes across from the beginning as a decent young woman whose eyes were open to the injustices around her. In due course, her well-to-do educated middleclass

background is not something to be grasped for herself, but to be diverted and used humbly for the well being of the poor and weak.

Her humanity is evident in every small generous step of her life – helping in parishes, caring for the elderly Callaghans, being the dependable sister for her siblings and their children, using her unexpected bounty to create a space for opportunities on a wider scale and which we enjoy even today. It was this attractive humanity which drew other women to her, to share her efforts, to set up the new Centre and even a new congregation, all to make a positive difference to the lives of those who were neglected. In this way we see her breaking barriers of her time in regard to women, placing them in central roles in family, work places, education and healthcare. In her dealings with the early sisters we see that humanity at every turn – she had an ‘I-Thou’ relationship with each one – enjoying, encouraging, supporting, challenging – as the need arose. She nursed them, or spurred them on and made fun with them, cried with them, sought their advice and forged strong friendships with them as with Frances Warde who was many years her junior. Young women in their 20s (full of energy but maybe not always wise) were trustingly made foundresses by Catherine and coached by her through her Foundation letters. And here we are today – from all over the world – because of her courageous and practical humanity.

Glimpses of Catherine’s unassuming personality come through her many letters (where she lets the cat out of the bag many times!), through her awareness of what holds together the dignity of every one especially the poor person – *the one thing the poor prize more highly than gold – the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of sorrows*, - in all of this we sense the innate goodness and kindness of Catherine. At every stage of her life we see her genuineness, her down-to-earth-ness, her ordinariness, her real goodness of mind and heart, her unrelenting drive to bring change where there was trouble and pain. She was flexible, personal, understanding, not bound tightly by rules and regulations, not rigid or unfeeling. There was nothing fake or sham or pretentious about Catherine’s interaction with people around her. She was real, concerned and responsive. You could say that one of the lessons from her life is to be truly and authentically human.

But she was not ‘all-seeing’; she was a woman of her own cultural context as we all are – hers was a servant/master context, a lay sister/choir sister context. This social/religious structure she accepted seemingly without question, but often those closest to her, even on her death bed, were her lay sisters. Her humanity was not immune to the knocks of life – she felt disappointment, bitterness, vexation and considerable stress at times, but they did not harden her and we see her pleading for grace to be bigger than them all. She faced the quandaries and unknowns which are part of the human condition, but her humanity would enable her to make immense shifts in order to achieve something for those who needed her. This we see especially when she agreed to begin a new religious Congregation in order to continue this unclaustrated service to those in need, or when she set out bravely on foundations outside Dublin and Ireland, or again when she even envisaged herself going to Newfoundland.

A special aspect of her humanity was her evident happiness and inner peace. She seems to have been deeply happy herself, brought happiness to others and once said that it was God’s will that everyone called to his service should be happy. We know the phrase used for someone who is always grumpy or overly serious...would you ever get-a-life! To be happy we need to trust. The

source of Catherine's happiness was undoubtedly her utter trust in and ardent desire to be united with God. *"We have one solid source of happiness in all our journeying – we can keep our hearts fixed on God"*. Her unshakable belief was that God was working through all, that God loved and valued every person and all creation, and that God's great desire was for the happiness of the poor. She exuded that happiness, she shared it, she sang it, she recited it, she looked for it in her communities. Teilhard de Chardin says that 'joy is the most infallible sign of God's presence'. It carried Catherine through difficulties, pain, sickness, through travels and impending death. Her life was a living witness to us of the recommendation in the first reading from Ecclesiastes – be happy and do good while you live..

While she was reticent about her inner life there is no doubting her deep sense of belonging to God, her utter reliance on Providence, her heart always centred in God. She was deeply affected by how the mission of Jesus – teaching, healing, and proclaiming a kingdom of equality - led to his death. She was riveted by how Jesus loved the poor, the sick, the Samaritan; by how he announced that he was the poor man, the sick woman, the prisoner, the bereft widow, the thirsty one in need of a cup of water. Catherine saw it as an honour, a privilege for her and for us to be allowed to continue that mercy mission of the Lord to those who are neglected and forgotten.

All of this not only draws us to her, but also enables us to see the capacity we all have to be like her in our own small way, to be inspired by her, to be people whose humanity is fully alive. Sometimes we are tempted to place the saints out of our reach; not so our Venerable Catherine (whose holiness is recognised by the Church in giving her that title). She is Venerable – holy and wholesome – in her very decent generous sincere goodness lived out for others in her time and place.

Her words that we were 'founded on Calvary' were a very deep insight into the nature of the Christian life and specifically into the early days of our Congregation, where death was a frequent visitor. For Catherine it did not so much mean looking on prayerfully at the tableau of Calvary but being in the tableau, being united with the pain and rejection of Jesus and the pain of all who experience injustice. Calvary was the pouring out of the life of Jesus into seeming nothingness in order to uphold God's deep anguish at the exclusion of the poor and the weak. In Jesus, such love poured out was not in vain – the garden of the tomb becomes the garden of new life expressed in the Acts. For Catherine, such love poured out in union with Christ was her deep desire and it brought new life and hope to the poor of her day. What does 'Founded on Calvary' mean for us in 21st century? As Sisters today we live in the midst of diminishment, dismay, displacement, and even destruction to put it mildly. Much of it escapes our comprehension, much of it would seek to quench the flickering candle of our enthusiasm, but all of it calls for a humanity which puts relationships first, which trusts in providence as Catherine did, and which believes in the empowering presence of the Spirit, calling us to be happy and to do good while we live.

And so our feast today in a sense re-constitutes us, re-grounds us, re-members us once again.

What a wonderful accident that this feast in 1827 saw the opening of this house, the beginnings of a new ministry and the foundation of a congregation of 'Mercy' carriers who would flood out to the ends of the earth. Whether it was accident, co-incidence, or providence who knows – but now we know it was a prophetic day for Catherine and for all of us. The feast itself – originally known as Our Lady of Ransom, the comforter of those who gave their lives in ransom for others during Spanish persecutions (see the Picture) – she who knew Calvary as no other and who accepted John and all of

us as her second family. This feast sets out for us the core of Mercy : to give my life, to spend my life, to exchange my life, for the sake of another. This is of God, who gave his only Son... it is of Christ Jesus – no greater love than to lay down one’s life; it is of Mary who gave birth into the human race the Son of God, her first born. It is of Catherine and her many companions who gave their all in one way or another to figuratively pay a ransom, give a life, spend a life to ease pain and bring hope to another.

John Paul 11 in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* says that Mercy is Love’s/God’s ‘*other Name*’. How privileged we are to have been given that name - I am a Mercy sister, I am a God sister, a Calvary sister! In our history, today was always a day of consecration, a day of recommitment, a day of seeing the challenge and call with fresh eyes, a day to ‘*decide to be good today and better tomorrow*’ – to be happy and do good while we live.

As we move further into our Eucharist now, in union with Christ Jesus and in the spirit of Catherine, we affirm our humanity, our desire to be a compassionate presence, our commitment to be happy and do good in the kindness of our God to the end. It is all eloquently captured by James Baxter in his poem MERCY....

Mercy by James K Baxter

My Love came through the city and they did not know him
With his beard and his eyes and his gentle hands
For he was a working man.

My Love stood on the lakeshore and spoke to the people there
And the fish in the water forgot to swim
And the birds were quiet in the air.

“Truth” he said and “Love” he said but his purest word was “Mercy”
And the fishermen left their boats and came
To share his poverty.

My Love was taken before the judge and they nailed him to a tree
With his strong face and his long brown hair
And the whiteness of his body.

“Truth” he said and “Love” he said but his purest word was “Mercy”
And the blood ran down and the sky grew dark
For the lack of his company.

My Love was only a working man and now he is God on high
I have left my books and my bed and my house
To follow him till I die.

“Truth” he said and “Love” he said but his purest word was “Mercy”
Flowers and candles I bring to him
And no man is kinder than he.
