



Mercy Day Liturgy

Mercy International Centre
64a Lower Baggot St, Dublin, Ireland

12.00 p.m. – Saturday, 24 September

Breaking Open the Word

Mary Kay Dobrowolny rsm

First Reading: 1 John 4:7-9,11-12

Second Reading: from *Tender Courage* by Joanna Regan rsm & Isabelle Keiss rsm, p. 46-47
Reprinted in *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, p. 899-900

Gospel: Mark 6:30-44

Earlier this week, I awakened with a dream in which I was visiting impoverished areas of a war-torn country. The location may have been Syria, but the country was not immediately identifiable in my dream. What was tangible and palpable was the level of poverty and the devastation, suffering and grief caused by human conflict.

As I sat with my dream throughout this week, I was reminded that Catherine's sleep was troubled by scenes of poverty that she saw on the streets of Dublin. Sr Mary Vincent Harnett in Limerick, one of the earliest biographers of Catherine, tells us that in the time period when Catherine was nursing Catherine Callaghan and sleeping on the couch in Catherine Callaghan's sick room:

...even then was her mind engaged in visions of charity and mercy to the poor; at one moment it was a group of orphan children to whom she was administering the kind offices of humanity; at another it was a crowd of young women engaged in the various occupations of household industry. Then the scene would suddenly change and picture to her a number of destitute females, deprived of their natural protectors and deserted by their friends, some flying with horror from the suggestions of the tempter. Alarmed and amazed at the wild revelling of her imagination she often started from her slumbers and burst into tears. 'Catherine,' the sick lady would sometimes say to her, 'I almost wish you never went to sleep, you frighten me so much and seem to suffer such agony' (*Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 145).

Whether it is in our waking moments or in our slumbering moments that we are deeply and profoundly disturbed and troubled by the scenes of poverty, violence and devastation, it can be hard to discern an appropriate and adequate response to visible need and deprivation. That is the scene that we find in today's gospel account (Mark 6:30-44). Jesus' disciples saw and recognized the need of the thousands surrounding them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. They saw the people's hunger and recognized the hour is very late (6:35). In their estimation, there was a small window of opportunity to address the need – the hunger of the people – before that need turned into a crisis situation. Their solution eerily echoes the words we hear in our current global refugee crises from xenophobic politicians and countries: 'Send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages' (6:36).

The disciples, like so many well meaning citizens of desired destination countries for today's refugees, are not hard hearted and unmoved by the plight of suffering and need surrounding them. These are the very disciples who have just returned from their missionary journey during which time they were preaching, casting out demons and healing the sick (6:13). As today's passage begins, the disciples had just returned and were seeking a quiet, deserted place alongside Jesus where they could rest and attend to their own needs as on their missionary journey they 'had no leisure even to eat' (6:31).

As I sit with this gospel passage and ponder the disciples' inadequate response to the suffering and need they recognize in the people surrounding them, I've asked myself what the passage can reveal to me about my own inadequate response to the suffering I see in my waking and slumbering hours. The passage seems to highlight two interrelated causes contributing to the disciples' inadequate response – first, the disciples have an underlying belief in the scarcity of available resources (there's not enough food, time or money available to meet the need), and second, they haven't adequately attended to their own hungers and their road-weary state blocks their ability to see the abundance and opportunity Jesus sees.

So this gospel points out two conflicting spiritualities. The first spirituality highlighted is that of the disciples - a spirituality of scarcity. This constrictive spirituality has a foundational belief that there are not enough available resources, whether that resource is time, money, food, jobs, government

infrastructure, etc., etc. When we are operating out of a spirituality of scarcity, we, like the disciples in today's gospel reading, see limits and dead ends and these limits and dead ends promote internal beliefs in our own powerlessness in the face of tremendous need. This spirituality in the best case scenario leads to an inadequate response to the suffering that surrounds us; and in the worst case scenario it leads to apathy and a complete lack of response.

The second spirituality highlighted by Jesus is a spirituality of abundance. In this expansive spirituality that looks at the same situation of need but through a lens of creativity ripe with possibility, there is a recognition that the fruits of Earth are abundant and far exceed what is necessary to meet the needs of all – in today's reading there are twelve baskets full of left over broken pieces of bread and fish after all had eaten their fill (6:42-43)!

Like Jesus, Catherine had an expansive spirituality of abundance that saw possibilities for fullness of life for all who surrounded her. While as a young woman visions of suffering may have troubled her sleep, she did not allow herself to be mired down with limits and the lack of resources; instead she looked critically and creatively at both the needs of those around her and the resources available to her and trusted in her provident God as she acted courageously to respond in faith with Mercy. That mercy-filled response inspired others to join with her to transform the Dublin of her day, to give women and children greater fullness of life through education, trade training, safe accommodation – ministries begun in this very house, opened this day, 24th September, 189 years ago.

The question remains, how can we today – disciples of Jesus and followers in the tradition of Catherine McAuley – challenge and transform any inclinations we have for a spirituality of scarcity to live out of and act from a spirituality of abundance instead? The first and second readings seem to point the way: love God and love others. Love of God and love of others are inseparably intertwined with the love of one drawing us ever deeper into the love of the other. As John tells us in the first reading, 'if we love one another God remains in us and God's love is brought to perfection in us' (1 John 4:12). It is out of this profound experience of the love of God intertwined with the love of others that creative, generative, life-giving mercy-filled response to need flows through us from a Source beyond us. As today's reading from *Tender Courage* says, 'In her experience of her own limitations, Catherine found a God of love, a hidden God, whose healing grace helped her transcend her frustrations, bitterness and weaknesses and enabled her to translate her own pain into a deep compassion for others. In this compassion, she experienced the alleviating effect created by her willing entry into the pain of others' (p. 46).

As we continue our prayer in this Eucharistic celebration, we pray that we too are drawn ever more deeply into the Love of God, and that the healing grace we experience from this generous, abundant Merciful God will be not for ourselves alone. We ask our Merciful God that our experience of God's Mercy will allow us enter into the pain of others and render merciful service 'not as an act of beneficence, but one of gratitude to God for mercy received' (p. 47). As we turn our attention to the Eucharistic table where we like the multitude gathered along the Sea of Galilee are fed by Jesus' breaking of the bread, we pause first to ponder our own commitment in Mercy and renew the promises we've made as Sisters, Associates, friends of Mercy, all partners together in this Mercy tradition founded in Mary's name and drawing inspiration from Catherine's life and response to God.