

Mercy and Leadership

1. When I came to think about giving this talk, I realized that leadership was not something I knew a lot about or had ever given a lot of thought to. So I began by asking myself the question – what is leadership? And the first thing that popped into my mind was the names of people who were examples of leaders – people like Donald Trump, Angela Merkel, Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama; Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa; Osama Bin Laden, Hitler. And then I started thinking of the qualities that these people embodied – strength, decisiveness, courage, self-belief, confidence, vision, ability to negotiate, wisdom and so on.
2. It was an interesting exercise but I felt it didn't tell me a lot about Mercy leadership. As you can see, a lot of names on the list aren't necessarily people you would hold up as examples of a compassionate approach. I also felt it wasn't really that relevant to my own life (and I'm guessing, not to yours either). For the most part, these are people who came to hold some sort of position and the kind of leadership they exercise is very much a 'top-down' kind of leadership – which is of course very important and some of these people were extraordinary in their vision and their personal virtues. But we can't all be extraordinary. So that got me to thinking about other kinds of leadership that might be a bit more relevant to people like me and you.
3. Just as I was reflecting along these lines, what came to my attention was a concert organized by Ariana Grande in response to the recent bombing in Manchester – the One Love Manchester concert. For those who don't know – on 22 May, Ariana Grande was giving a concert in Manchester and, just as people were leaving, a young man called Salman Abedi set off a bomb in the lobby. He was a suicide bomber with links to Libya and ISIS. 22 people were killed and over 100 injured. Many of them were children and one child who died was only 8 years old. It was a horrific act that brought so much suffering and devastation in its wake. It must have been extremely traumatizing for all those at the concert including Ariana Grande herself. Immediately after the event, Ariana Grande left the country and went back to her home in the US and was criticized by some in the media for not doing more for the victims. Within two weeks, however, she, with the help of others, had organized a benefit concert with 'a star-studded line-up' to take place in Manchester to raise funds for those affected by the bombing but more importantly to take a stance against terrorism.

4. That in itself is an impressive achievement. But, to be honest, charity concerts by celebrities are quite commonplace these days and it is easy to become cynical about people's motivation and the true purpose of the exercise. It is not the sort of thing that would normally attract my attention. But there was something different about this concert – something that is not so easy to put into words. I was at home with my mother (who is 85 years old) when it came on TV and we started to watch it and both of us were very touched and moved by it – yet neither of us would be your typical Ariana Grande fan! What touched us, I think, was the sincerity and goodwill and depth of compassion that was evident among all the people at the concert and particularly in Ariana Grande herself. As my mother said, she was giving all of herself there on the stage. It was a response from the heart.

5. That was really what made this concert different. Ariana Grande was not doing this just because it was a good thing or the 'right' thing to do; she was doing it because she cared. She herself had been touched by the pain and trauma of what had happened. That was evident from the statement she made on Twitter just after the attack – “Broken. From the bottom of my heart, I am so so sorry. I don't have words.” There is something about the stark simplicity and rawness of this that captures the brokenness we feel when something so terrible happens. That caring was also evident in many other ways – in the simplicity of what she said to her manager about responding by organizing a concert – “I can't do nothing”; in the way she made time to visit people who were injured in the bombing or who had lost family members – a huge undertaking for someone who is only 23; in the invitation she gave to a local school choir to sing with her at the concert and the way she stepped in and comforted one of the younger members of the choir when she became upset.

6. The concert itself was also a statement of love and courage in the face of the hatred and fear the bombing was intended to provoke. The mere fact the concert was taking place at all was thwarting the intention of the bombing. Terrorist acts by their nature are designed to cause fear and division yet two weeks after this attack, tens of thousands of people were gathering in the same city for another concert despite another terrorist attack the previous night in London and despite the fact the threat of another terrorist attack was ranked as severe. Simply holding the concert and attending it was an act of great courage. But more importantly, it was a statement of love in the face of hatred and violence. In the words of the victims and their families, in the theme and the choice of songs sung at the concert and in the contributions made by the artists who were singing, the values of love, solidarity and

unity were expressed. Above all, the choice to love rather than hate was stressed and, as Ariana Grande herself said, “we can’t let hatred win.”

7. As I reflected on the concert and what it had to say about leadership, it was obvious that Ariana Grande herself had shown great leadership in initiating the event and in organizing things in the very personal and heartfelt way she did. Certainly, that was, I believe, an example of Mercy leadership in action. What I found really interesting, however, was how much it revealed about other kinds of leadership as well.
 - Ariana Grande could not have organized a concert like this by herself. She needed help from people like her manager Scooter Braun and from the other stars who collaborated with her. It’s interesting to notice that these were people she knew and that the artists who took part all either had a personal connection with her or with Manchester.
 - Organizing an event like this is a huge undertaking and it usually takes months, if not years. Organizing the logistics and, in particular, the security for an event like this in less than two weeks was a big risk for people to take and they also showed leadership in taking that risk.
 - Concerts do not take place without people to attend them. In light of the terrorist threat that was hanging over the event, those who attended showed great courage and leadership – particularly those who had been at the previous concert, some of whom had been injured at it. It is not easy to go back to a place where one has been traumatized and they showed great spirit and resilience in doing it.
 - As people were leaving the concert, the moment when the bomb had gone off at the previous concert, someone began to sing ‘Manchester, we’re strong, we’re singing our song’, a song by Robbie Williams that had been sung at the concert. That was very moving and again an example of leadership.
 - The victims of the bombing and their families showed leadership in supporting the event and inspiring it. Ariana Grande spoke very movingly of her conversations with them. Just to mention one in particular: a young boy named Adam (13) who was injured in the bombing and who also lost his best friend said “make sure to tell them don’t go forward in anger; show love because love spreads.” For someone who was suffering so much from an attack like this, it shows leadership on a heroic level to have the openness of heart to seek love and peace rather than hatred or revenge.
 - Others who showed leadership were those who criticized the event – mainly for being too soon after the bombing. It takes courage to give voice to a different opinion when the momentum is all going the other way. But we need people who criticize and who speak for

those whose needs may not be met otherwise. People are different and while the event was inspiring for some, undoubtedly for others it would have been too soon and too much. It was a reminder that not everyone's needs were served by an event like this.

- Salman Abedi, the suicide bomber, also showed leadership of a kind. It does take courage to plan an event like this and to sacrifice one's own life to it and to take the lives of others. It is the same kind of courage that inspired the leaders of our own 1916 rebellion. I was struck by the fact that he was almost the same age as Ariana Grande yet the leadership they both showed was in a very different cause and with hugely different outcomes.
- After the bombing, retaliatory attacks took place on mosques and Muslim centres e.g. an arson attack on the mosque in Oldham. In response to that, two young women set up a Facebook page for people to express their solidarity with the Muslim people of north England and to volunteer to help out at their local mosque or Muslim centre. Again, two examples of leadership but in a very different cause.

8. So what does this concert tell us about leadership? I think it tells us that there can be all kinds of leadership and that leadership is not simply the preserve of those in positions of authority. I think it also says that leadership has something to do with power and with how we use that power. We all have power (even though we might not always feel we have) – and when we exercise our power in some way (even in very small ways), then we are exercising leadership – for better or for worse.
9. We can see this very clearly in a school situation. Who is the leader in a school? Who has power? Our first answer would usually be the principal. They are the person in charge and they get to make the decisions. But it's not only the principal who has power. Certainly, individual teachers have power and sometimes a teacher you like or a teacher you are afraid of can exercise more influence on you than the principal. But again, it's not only the teachers who have power – individual students can also have a lot of power. To me, when I was going to school, it often seemed that it was the most popular students who had the most power and most influence. Sometimes, it might be the captain of the football team or the funniest or the smartest or the most likeable. Or sometimes simply being the person who's there, who follows or who doesn't follow. We all have power and we can use it for good or for bad. In a school situation, this might revolve around how we relate to other students – we might bully someone or we might befriend them. It might be as simple as sitting beside someone who is not popular – or not; or welcoming in someone who is new – or not. Or leadership

might be something like not going along with what everyone else thinks or does – not drinking or taking drugs just because others think it's cool. In Ireland, we had the example of Donal Walsh (16) who was terminally ill and who spoke out very passionately and eloquently against people committing suicide as teenagers.

- 10.** So we can all be leaders – but what about Mercy and leadership? What makes Mercy leadership different? Here I think we need to pause for a moment to look at Jesus because when we talk about Mercy, it's important to remember that Jesus embodies the Mercy of God. He *is* Mercy. So when we look at him, we see God's Mercy in action. And when we look at Jesus, the first thing we see is God-with-us, the God who became flesh and lived among us. The same God who created us is also the God who is one of us and one with us, who chose to take on our humanity, with all its frailties and its beauty, so that through His love for us, we might become one with God. Even though we sometimes refer to God with titles such as the all-Powerful or the Almighty, God did not come among us with a show of power or force as we humans might do. He came as a baby, vulnerable, defenceless, unable to do anything for himself. As St. Paul says, quoting an ancient Christian hymn, "He emptied himself, he did not hold onto equality with God but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." So we can see that something very different is going on in how Jesus uses power. From the very beginning, he did not see power as something to hold onto or use for himself; it was something he gave away.
- 11.** A central image used to portray Jesus in the Gospel of John is when he washes the feet of the disciples. That turns all our ideas of power on their head. Here is he, the Rabbi, the Teacher, the Lord and Master and he chooses to take the role that only the most lowly of slaves would take – washing the feet of those he loves, washing them free of all the dust and dirt of the journey, washing them with love. That says something profound about Mercy leadership. It is not about status or wealth or position. It is about service. It is about emptying oneself and becoming one with others, not holding onto things or holding oneself back. In emptying himself of power and becoming one with the people he encounters, Jesus turns power into love – a love that heals and redeems and saves. That is how Mercy uses power. It turns power into love. That is Mercy leadership.
- 12.** We see this throughout Jesus' life and ministry in how he was with people and in how he responded to situations of need. He did not hold himself back. He gave himself freely and became one with others – whether that was when he was eating with tax collectors and

sinner (people it was considered shameful to associate with); or talking to the Samaritan woman at the well (at a time when Jews and Samaritans did not have anything to do with each other); or healing the leper (who did not expect anyone to want to touch him); or teaching others not to judge the woman caught in adultery. Time and again, we see Jesus being moved with compassion, crossing boundaries to touch others, to meet them where they were at, to be one with them – always in a way that was healing and that brought freedom from whatever was holding the person back. Of course, Jesus wasn't always meek and mild. He was no pushover. He could be very strong and sharp in confronting those in power e.g. breaking the Law by healing someone on the Sabbath or becoming angry as he cleansed the Temple. This too says something about Mercy leadership. It can be strong, it can be challenging and it can be angry – but always in a spirit of service and love rather than power.

- 13.** The cross is perhaps where we can see Jesus' giving of himself most clearly. By any worldly standards, Jesus died a failure. His mission was in shambles, he was abandoned by his followers, betrayed by his disciples, tortured for his beliefs and he died in terrible pain and loneliness. He could have escaped all this - yet he was faithful to the end, even on the cross still crying out to his Abba, his Father, still loving, still forgiving, still giving of himself. Something about the way he died, about his giving so completely of himself and his life and his spirit and his power, led to a transformation that could not have been foreseen, to Resurrection – a mystery we cannot understand yet it speaks of a love greater than any power we on earth can imagine, a love that is greater than death.
- 14.** When I think of Jesus on the cross in that moment of utter abandonment and desolation, what comes to mind is an image used by the Buddhist writer John Welwood – the broken-hearted warrior. When he uses that image, John Welwood is talking about how difficult it is to stay engaged with all the pain and sorrow there is in the world. Often our first impulse is to turn away and close our eyes to the magnitude of all the suffering around us. It is too much. We fear being overwhelmed and so we shut down, we withdraw into our own world and our own concerns and we build a shell around ourselves to avoid being touched by the pain. Yet this betrays what Welwood calls 'the heart's pure response to the pain of the world' – because the first thing the heart wants to do when it is confronted with suffering is to reach out and help, to respond, to do *something* to make things better. This is our first response to suffering. It may be naïve or idealistic but we want to save the world. This is the instinct that leads us to get involved. It might be through cleaning up the environment or

building houses for those who are homeless, helping people in addiction, speaking up for people who are oppressed or discriminated against, welcoming those who are refugees or displaced. We soon learn, however, that saving the world is not easy. So many things stand in our way and sometimes those who most need our help do not even seem to want it or to be able to accept it. I see this with all the people begging on the streets, on our doorstep, here in Dublin. There are so many, each with their own story. The reasons for their begging are so complex and finding a way to help is not easy. How can we stay open to life in a situation like this? How can we continue to engage with the world and not shut down or withdraw into our own shell?

- 15.** The answer, according to Welwood, is that we must learn to live with a broken heart. Here's what he says: "It is only through letting our heart break that we discover something unexpected: the heart cannot actually break, it can only break open. What breaks when we are touched by life's pain is the contraction around our heart that we have been carrying for so long. When we allow ourselves feel both our love for this world – and the pain of this world – together, at the same time – the heart breaks out of its shell. Then the heart's true character is revealed – as an openness, an acute sensitivity where we feel the world inside us and are not separate from it. There is no way to avoid the rawness and pain this brings except by living in a state of contraction. To live with a broken-open heart is to experience life full strength."
- 16.** So what we must do is allow our hearts to break open and feel the pain of the world when we encounter it. This will naturally lead the heart to want to respond even though the pain or suffering we meet may be beyond any easy solution. What the pain then calls us to do is to access the warrior within us, the one who can ask: "what deeper resource is this adversity calling on me to bring forth?" When we stand our ground and call for what we need, somehow what we need is given to us. In this way, encounters with pain and suffering draw out in us qualities we never knew we had which enable us to respond from a deeper place within ourselves. These may be qualities like inner strength, vision that allows us to see the bigger picture, to dream of things as they could be rather than as they are, humour, love, kindness, friendship. This seems to be what happened in Ariana Grande's response to the Manchester bombing. She felt the pain of what happened as her own pain (we saw that in the brokenness of her statement on Twitter) and she responded in a way that drew on resources within herself of vision and compassion and ability to collaborate with others. The magnitude of the suffering she encountered did seem to break her heart; but rather than

being overcome by that, she found her inner warrior and responded from that place within of greater love and compassion. As did the others who showed leadership such as the victims and their families. As did the Good Samaritan. He allowed himself feel the pain of the wounded man and this enabled him respond from a place of greater generosity than the others who passed by. And of course Jesus took on the pain of all humanity and responded with a love that broke all boundaries. Being a broken-hearted warrior gives us hope and it means we do not have to give in to cynicism or depression about the state of the world. As Welwood says, the broken-hearted warrior is an essential role model for our time.

- 17.** Catherine McAuley is also an example of a broken-hearted warrior. She faced the pain of the world of her time – people living in poverty, children going hungry, people dying of cholera, women forced into sexual exploitation. No doubt, these experiences touched into the pain of her own childhood when she and her family experienced poverty, insecurity, being pushed from house to house (like someone who is homeless) and living on the margins. These are experiences that can harden us, make us bitter or cynical. Often when pain causes us to shut down, it is because it is touching into our own pain. Catherine did not shut down in the face of the pain she witnessed and neither was she overcome by it. Instead, she remained open to the pain and held it in her heart and it called her to respond with all the resources she had at her disposal, giving all she had to set up the House of Mercy, this house here in Baggot St and to reach out to those who were poor and on the margins just as she herself had once been. When she started with just two sisters, how could she have foreseen what would happen? If she had stopped to think, would she have gone ahead? Her response came from the heart, not from the head. That is Mercy leadership; it comes from the heart.
- 18.** It is important to remember that being a Mercy leader or a broken-hearted warrior is not all about doing big things. As Saint Theresa of Calcutta says, we can do small things with great love. Sometimes when we look around us and see all there is to be done, it can be off-putting. It feels as if we can never make a difference because we cannot do it all. That is a misplaced fear many of us have – misplaced because we are not responsible for doing it all and we never were. We are responsible only for doing what we can. The outcomes, what actually happens as a result of our efforts, does not depend on us; it depends on the One who is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine. As this prayer written in honour of Oscar Romero says: “We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete

but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest... The kingdom always lies beyond us and we may never see the end results of our efforts – but we plant seeds that one day will grow.”

19. Mercy leadership is not about working to a blueprint of how things should be. It is about responding to life – sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small ways. It depends on what life puts in our path. It may take as much courage to befriend someone outside our normal circle as it does to set up a housing project in the slums. Etty Hillesum was a Jewish woman who lived in Amsterdam during the Second World War. As the Nazis approached, she had an opportunity to escape but she chose voluntarily to stay and face what was to come in solidarity with others who had no chance to escape. As she saw it, this was what life was putting in her path and she wanted to face it and to choose love, not hate, and, in love, follow her path to the end wherever it took her. She died in a concentration camp at the age of 29. As she reflected on the causes of the war, she said “perhaps it is because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbour.” This might be hard to understand but it is an example of how it is the small things that matter, the things that come out of the heart (Mark's Gospel). It is how we are with our neighbour in small things that will determine how we are in the bigger things. As Etty Hillesum says, “Ultimately, we have just one moral duty, to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves – more and more peace – and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace will also be in our troubled world.” Sometimes, that's exactly what is needed – to find peace in ourselves and to be peace in our world.

20. What matters, when we are faced with the pain of the world, is to do something. To act and respond in some way, no matter how small. What holds us back so often is fear. When we act, we risk failing - and failing makes us feel vulnerable – and none of us likes to feel vulnerable. We like to be in control, to protect ourselves from the feelings that failure may bring. We fear feeling embarrassed or humiliated, we fear what other people may think of us, we fear disappointing others or ourselves, we fear feeling inadequate or stupid or not good enough. We have a lot of fear around failure. As Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist teacher says, one of the most important lessons we can learn in life is how to live with failure. According to her, when we fail, we do one of two things: we blame others (which leads us to become angry, vindictive and bitter) or, far more often, we blame ourselves. We label ourselves a failure – literally, I am a failure - and we become angry with ourselves,

calling ourselves names, attacking ourselves for being useless, stupid, etc and generally being far more vicious and judgmental with ourselves than we would ever be with someone else. This can lead to feelings of depression, worthlessness and ultimately to addiction or despair. As Pema Chodron says, we need to question this labelling of ourselves. Maybe I am not a failure. Maybe failure is simply the fact that things are not working out at the moment in the way I want them to. Maybe I am just hurting because things are not working out. Maybe I can be compassionate with myself when I am hurting. And then we can go further. Maybe this hurting is helping me to learn something valuable. Maybe it is opening up something in me. Maybe it is shifting my life in a new direction, helping me to change and grow. What we need to do is learn to hold the pain and vulnerability we feel with compassion and remember, as the Irish writer James Joyce said, "mistakes are the portals of discovery." If we can bring a sense of curiosity to our mistakes, and if we are open to see where they will lead us, we will discover that failure is an opportunity to learn something new, to change and grow. As another Irish writer, Samuel Beckett says, "ever tried, ever failed, try again, fail again, fail better."

- 21.** It is important not to hold back from the good we could do for fear of failure. The most repeated phrase in the Bible is 'do not be afraid.' Perhaps what helped Jesus be the shining broken-hearted warrior he was is the fact that he had such a strong sense of being loved by the Father. He knew this because he had heard the voice of the Spirit say to him: You are my Son, the Beloved and I delight in you. Ultimately, it is love which helps us to overcome our fears, to trust as Jesus trusted and to give of ourselves as he gave. Each of us is a child of God. That means each of us is beloved by God and delighted in by him. The more we realize this, the more we will be free to act and to use our own unique power to love and to make the world a better place in whatever way I am called to do, knowing that it is all part of the Great Adventure of life and it is all being watched over and held in compassion by the One who loves us without condition.