

“An Earth Community Being Shattered by Displacement”: Mercy Perspectives¹

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There have been several stark reminders in recent times that our Earth community is being shattered by displacement. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) took place in June 2012. Whether the conference will be judged a success in addressing the urgent needs of the most vulnerable, including the Earth itself, will become evident over the course of time. June 20, 2012, was World Refugee Day and Refugee Week in Australia was held from June 17-23, providing an opportunity to focus on, celebrate and honour the courage of refugees who have fled persecution and sought a new life in a new country. The celebrations were overshadowed, however, by reports in the Australian media of a capsized boat of asylum-seekers discovered on June 21, with around ninety people dead or missing. The boats have continued to come, politicians have continued to debate, and still no solution, long-term or short-term, has been found to the plight of these desperate people.² The vulnerability of asylum seekers is distressingly evident.

Displacement and vulnerability are experienced by an ever-growing number within our Earth community. On October 12, 2011, lawyer Frances Simmons responded to an ABC *Four Corners* television program of the previous night on slavery in the sex industry with an article in *The Punch* entitled “Slavery in Australia goes beyond the sex trade” (2011). Simmons represents trafficked people in immigration and compensation matters as part of the free legal service provided by Anti-Slavery Australia. While Simmons knows well the seriousness and extent of slavery in the sex trade, she also

comments on the widespread incidence of labour-slavery and sexual abuse within other Australian industries. Simmons warns of the dangers of focussing exclusively on the horrors of human trafficking and its consequences and draws attention to the stories of survival in the midst of appalling exploitation. Her hope is for an Australia where survivors of trafficking “are not treated like property or pitiful stories, but where their rights are protected and respected; where they have the freedom to imagine the future, and that future looks good” (2011).

There are multiple layers of displacement resulting from systems that exploit the vulnerability of the 1.3 billion on our planet who live in poverty (O’Donahue 2011: 48). As Maura O’Donahue points out, women represent 70% of this staggering number, and “[t]wo-thirds of the children in the world who cannot access primary education are girls” (2011: 48). Reflection on global poverty and displacement alerts us to the need to highlight gender as a significant factor in our theologizing. Women across the globe, even in highly sophisticated societies like ours, are bent beneath the burdens of exploitation, of displacement from their homes and countries of origin, beneath burdens of debt-bondage and shame.

What wisdom might we draw upon as we seek to lighten the burdens and to bring release from whatever enslaves our companions, human and other-than-human,³ on our shared planetary journey?⁴ That was the sort of question teasing the consciousness of almost one thousand Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea as we prepared for the inaugural Chapter of the new Mercy Institute that was to come into being in December 2011, although we may not all have articulated our questions in these terms.⁵

In the period leading up to the Chapter, we reflected, individually and in groups, on our founding stories. Young women at risk in nineteenth century Dublin had provided the initial catalyst for the establishment of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy in 1831 (Sullivan 2012: 55). Catherine McAuley, founder of the Institute, invested her considerable inheritance in the education and betterment of these women and invited well-resourced women to join her in responding to the pain of vulnerable women in her time (Sullivan 2012: 78-92). As well as reflecting on the Mercy tradition established by Catherine McAuley and her companions, we explored the biblical foundations of our Mercy life and mission.⁶ Our work was informed by feminist biblical and theological approaches to our foundational texts and traditions. We brought the fruits of our seven year reflection to the Institute Chapter.

Before turning to the Chapter statement, we note that our coming together to form the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea has represented a “Sea Change” for the many sisters who decided to throw in their lot with each other in a new configuration. The new structure, and the obvious determination of the sisters to make it work, is already creating new possibilities for mission, community, and the flourishing of life. In this development phase of the Institute, the Chapter statement is functioning as a compass for new and renewed mission initiatives and for a renewal of our Mercy way of life.

The delegates to the Chapter numbered sixty Sisters of Mercy from various parts of Australia and Papua New Guinea.⁷ On behalf of the whole Institute, we engaged in a process of formulating a statement that might encapsulate our understanding of ourselves at this graced moment of our history and our understanding of the mission to which we are called, in collaboration with our numerous Mercy associates and countless

partners in the Mercy institutions within Australia and Papua New Guinea. The statement that emerged from the Chapter deliberations is as follows:

Mercy impels us to extravagant hospitality, compassion and justice in the earth community being shattered by displacement.

This statement sought to reflect the collective mind of the broader membership about the mission and way of life to which we are called. Just as the Sisters of Mercy and/or their associates and partners in ministry have no monopoly on the experience of God's mercy impelling them to action, so too with the statement that came out of our Chapter. We offer for reflection our story and our statement to all who find in God's mercy an impetus to action for justice. We long for a lasting peace that enables the entire Earth community to flourish.

That the Earth community today is being broken and shattered in unprecedented ways is rarely questioned. That there is hope for our battered Earth community, however, was one of the premises underlying the decision to include "being" before "shattered" in our statement. Our statement is thus grounded in hope: there is hope for the Earth community, and our belief is that mercy, impelled to action, can bring hope to a threatened planet and the life it supports, both human and other-than-human.

In continuity with the Mercy lens of our founding sisters, the authors of this paper have a particular concern for women and their place in the Earth community. Unlike our founding sisters, we approach our sacred texts, biblical and Mercy, from our location within the community of feminist biblical scholars that has developed over the past four decades, and more specifically within the community of feminist biblical scholars who are exploring ecological hermeneutics.⁸ We bring to the texts and to their interpretation both a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of retrieval. We

suspect that our biblical texts are both anthropocentric and pervasively androcentric. We exercise a hermeneutics of retrieval so that the bias of the text might be exposed and the presence, the voices and the agency of Earth itself and of women and children in particular might be imaginatively retrieved. Our specific eco-feminist approach is sensitive to the interconnectedness of the whole Earth community. In the context of our Mercy Institute, our perception is that the membership seems to be moving to a more inclusive embrace of the whole Earth community and consciousness of the effects on women and children of the multiple levels of displacement affecting Earth. Our intention with this paper is to explore the biblical foundations of our Chapter statement in ways that will open a space for more detailed eco-feminist engagement with the text.

Our opening comments in this paper focussed on the vulnerability of and displacement in the Earth community, including the Earth itself, humans who are trafficked, asylum seekers and refugees. It is evident that the Earth cries out for justice and release from exploitation. Refugees fleeing war, persecution and famine are in need of release. Those who cannot flee war-ravaged territories are in particular need of release. The poverty-stricken Indonesians who crew the leaky boats bringing asylum seekers to Christmas Island are in need of release from the burdens that drive them to put themselves in the power of the people smugglers and take such risks to feed their families. The women who fear or experience the horrors of being trafficked are among the most vulnerable on our planet. They too cry out for release. All those who have been broken in spirit by their circumstances yearn for mercy and justice.

In this paper, we focus on some of the Gospel stories and traditions that inform the statement that took shape over our time together in Chapter, though not all of these stories/traditions were explicitly engaged at the Chapter. Certain Lukan stories in

particular informed the shaping of our statement since the Gospel of Luke highlights God's mercy in the midst of brokenness more explicitly than do the other Gospels. This paper will therefore seek to bring Lukan Gospel perspectives on mercy, hospitality, compassion and justice into dialogue with the displacement being experienced within the Earth community today.

In the face of vulnerability and displacement, "mercy impels us". In the Gospel of Luke, Mary announces that God's mercy is for those who fear God "from generation to generation" (1:50).⁹ Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, links God's mercy with the Mosaic covenant: God "has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered [God's] holy covenant" (1:72). The final words of Zechariah's canticle foreshadow the agenda of the Lukan Jesus: "By the tender mercy (*splagchna eleous*) of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (1:78-79).

Although the Gospels are written in Greek, any study of Gospel language must take account of its groundedness in both the Hebrew and Greek versions of the First Testament. In the Jewish tradition that informs the Gospel of Luke, the God of Israel is a God of mercy and graciousness (Exod 33:19; 34:6). "Mercy/compassion and their close relation, justice, are ways in which Israel named its encounter with God and hence named God" (Wainwright 2002: 2).

Mercy, often translated as steadfast love or loving kindness, is always a relational concept in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is predicated of God in God's covenant relationship with the whole of creation (Psalms 108:4; 119:64; 136:4-9; Jer 9:24), as well as with God's people, and of God's people in their relationships with each other. It is frequently linked with justice, understood as both righteousness or right relationship

and justice at law. Mercy and justice describe God's way of acting in the Earth community and even encapsulate God's desire: "I act with steadfast love [mercy], justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight..." (Jer 9:24). Because God is merciful and just, God's people are called to be merciful and just. Hosea uses powerful agricultural images to communicate this call: "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love [mercy]; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek [your God], that [God] may come and rain righteousness upon you" (10:12). The Gospel of Luke takes up this relationship between mercy and justice in the context of Zechariah's canticle, where we find it is the mercy of God that empowers the community to serve God "without fear, in holiness and righteousness (*dikaiousunē*)" (1:75).

Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry (4:16-21) offers the reader an insight into the mission of the Lukan Jesus and functions as a catalyst for a deeper understanding of the related Lukan themes of mercy, hospitality, compassion and justice. The setting for this episode is the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus goes into this space on a Sabbath day "as was his custom" (4:16). He stands up to read and is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Knowing what he is looking for, he unrolls the scroll and finds and proclaims a text that encapsulates his understanding of himself and his mission. He is the one on whom God's Spirit rests. He is God's anointed one who has been sent on a five-fold mission: to bring good news to the poor, *ptōchois*, literally to beggars or the destitute (Esler 1987: 180); to proclaim release to the captives; to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind; to send forth the shattered, *tethrausmenous*, in release; and to proclaim a year of God's acceptance, literally an "acceptable year" (4:18-19).

A key word in the Greek text, *tethrausmenous*, “the shattered”, is usually translated as “the oppressed”. In the present discussion, this term calls for special attention. It comes from the verb *thrauō* which literally means “to break in pieces” or “to shatter” as pottery might be shattered (Friberg, Friberg and Miller 2000: 199). The mission of the Lukan Jesus, then, is to those being “shattered” or “broken”. We read this text through the lens of the above statistic that women constitute 70% of the 1.3 billion on our planet who live in poverty and in view of the effects of global warming on the entire Earth community. The expression “shattered” or “broken” can be read both literally, as a physical event, and metaphorically. It occurs only once in the whole of the Second Testament.¹⁰ It would therefore seem to be an intentional choice of term here by Luke, a choice that highlights the particular vulnerability of those to whom Jesus will minister.

The Greek word *aphesis*, meaning “release”, is also a key element of the Lukan Jesus’ proclamation. The Lukan Jesus announces that he is sent to proclaim “release to the captives” and “to send forth the shattered in release” (4:18; author translation). The first usage of *aphesis*, like most of the passage, comes from LXX Isaiah 61:1-2. The second appearance of the term is part of an additional phrase taken from Isaiah 58:6: “send forth the shattered in release” where release also translates *aphesis*. It seems that Luke has added this phrase to put emphasis on the notion of release. The addition has the effect of incorporating the context of the justice statement of Isaiah 58:6-7 (Byrne 2000: 49) which speaks of loosing the bonds of injustice and the yokes that oppress, sharing with the hungry, homeless and naked.

The first words that Jesus reads in the synagogue (4:18) and his appropriation of those words to his own ministry (4:21) need to be read in the context of the preceding

episodes with their emphasis on God's Spirit as the impelling force in Jesus' life. At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends upon him and he is identified as God's beloved son (3:22). Full of the Spirit (4:1a), Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness (4:1b). He emerges from his time of testing in the wilderness to begin his Galilean ministry. Again, Jesus is characterised as filled with the power of the Spirit (4:14), so it is no surprise that his first words in the synagogue relate to the Spirit (4:18) or that he appropriates those words to what he is doing in their midst.

The Lukan Jesus understands that his mission is to proclaim release to the captives, to those bound and burdened. His proclamation is empowered by the presence of God's Spirit upon and within him. Jesus embodies God's mercy and compassion for those who are being shattered and broken by the oppressive structures, laws and socio-political interactions of their first-century Roman imperial world.¹¹ In contrast to the Roman Empire, God's empire or visitation is concerned with mercy, justice, and the flourishing of life.

While a different set of structures, laws and socio-political interactions shape the Earth community in our times, the effect in many instances is brokenness as it was in the time of the Roman Empire. Those subjected to violence may experience physical brokenness. They may also endure another form of shattering or brokenness of spirit caused by an experience of powerlessness. Those who are trafficked are amongst the captives of today, as are the asylum seekers spending lengthy periods in detention centres. The Earth itself suffers from exploitation and destruction, leaving it bruised and broken and in need of God's mercy and compassion.

Luke's use of the Greek word *splagchnizomai*, "to be moved with compassion or mercy" will help to expand our understanding of God's mercy. The equivalent Hebrew

expression derives from the word for womb *rechem* to which the Hebrew term for womb compassion, *rachamim*, is etymologically related. To have womb compassion is to be moved to compassionate response in the face of suffering. The Greek verb *splagchnizomai* is related to the noun *splagchnon* which refers to the “inward parts or entrails” (Bauer et al. 2000: 938). *Splagchnizomai* is to be moved with compassion and mercy to the very depths of one’s being. It implies a physical response, impelling to action the one so moved. Anne Elvey’s ground-breaking work on reading Luke through the five senses considers compassion and divine hospitality under the rubric of touch that is “felt in the gut”: “For Luke, the theme of divine hospitality forms a pattern in which compassion, divine and human, is mediated by touch felt in the gut” (2011: 82).

Splagchnizomai appears three times in the Gospel of Luke. It is used of Jesus in relation to the widow at Nain whose only son has died, leaving her vulnerable (7:11-17). Seeing her, Jesus is moved with compassion (*esplagchnisthē*) for her (7:13), responding to her vulnerability in word and action: “In effect, Jesus’ action responds to *her* need as well as the son’s. In his response to the widow, Jesus enacts the bringing of good news to the poor (cf. 4.18; 7.22). He liberates her from the effects of death” (Dowling 2007: 144-45).¹²

The other two occurrences of *splagchnizomai* in the Lukan Gospel are in well-known parables. The “Good Samaritan” is moved with compassion (*esplagchnisthē*) when he “sees” the stranger who is robbed, stripped and left half-dead on the roadside (10:33). The priest and the Levite who pass by ahead of the Samaritan “see” without responding (10:31-32). “In the Lukan narrative the compassion that touches the other, that makes compassionate contact with the other, is predicated on a certain kind of

seeing. The seeing that prompts compassion stands in contrast to other kinds of seeing” (Elvey 2011: 83).

The Samaritan pours out his precious resources of oil and wine in a healing gesture, bandages the wounds of the stranger, puts him on his own animal, takes him to an inn, takes personal care of him overnight, then leaves him in the care of the innkeeper with the assurance that he will cover all future financial costs (10:34-35). In their extravagance, the Samaritan’s actions embody the mercy and hospitality of God.

In the Parable of the Father and the Two Sons (15:11-32), the father is said to be “filled with compassion” (*esplagchnisthē*) when he sees his returning younger son (15:20) who has wasted his inheritance. The father who has seemingly been watching out for his son, runs and welcomes him back, and then celebrates his return (15:20-24). The younger son is often referred to as the “prodigal son” on account of his extravagant and wasteful lifestyle. In other words, he is “prodigal” in a negative sense. The father might also be considered “prodigal”, though in a positive sense, because of the extravagantly hospitable nature of his response to his son’s return. The father’s hospitality takes the form of arranging for the younger son to be given the best robe, a ring for his finger and sandals on his feet. He also calls for the fatted calf to be killed so that the son’s return can be lavishly celebrated (15:22-24). The angry reaction of the older brother serves to highlight the apparently excessive nature of the father’s compassion and consequent hospitality (15:25-30). The father’s response to the older brother demonstrates that his hospitality is limitless. It is expansive enough to embrace both of his sons.

Both the Samaritan in the first parable and the father in the second allow themselves to be vulnerable. The Samaritan places his personal safety at risk by his

actions. According to Kenneth Bailey, he does not know the extent of the man's expenses which he promises to pay and even leaves himself open to the accusation of being involved in the man's attack (1983: 51-54). The father risks losing honour by running to embrace his son and accepting him back into the family (Byrne 2000: 129-30). The compassion they embody comes at a cost.

These examples from the Lukan Gospel demonstrate that God's compassion or mercy, embodied in Jesus, is a costly exercise. They also raise questions for our consideration of the present situation of the Earth community. If we are moved with compassion by the displacement of so many, how are we impelled to action? Are we prepared to bear the cost? How can all that is being broken experience God's mercy through us? How can we open ourselves to experience God's mercy through all that is being shattered?

The use of the Greek noun *eleos*, meaning mercy, pity or compassion, and its cognates in the Gospel of Luke provide further insight into the notion of mercy. The fluidity of mercy language is most evident in the variety of Greek expressions, *eleos*, *eleēmosunē*, *oiktirmos*, *charis*, or even *dikaiousunē* (justice or right relationship), employed in the Septuagint (LXX) to translate the Hebrew. In the LXX, *eleos* generally translates the Hebrew *chesed*, loving kindness or steadfast love. *Eleos* appears several times in the Lukan infancy narrative in relation to God's mercy (1:50, 54, 58, 72, 78). In Mary's canticle of praise (1:46-55), God's mercy (*eleos*, 1:50) is associated with God's action on behalf of the vulnerable – lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. At the same time, the powerful and rich will lose their privileged status (1:52-53). In the same canticle, God's mercy (*eleous*) is linked to God's help of Israel and

faithfulness to God's promises (1:54), a connection which is also found in the canticle of Zechariah (1:72).

Elizabeth experiences God's great mercy (*eleos*) in the birth of her son, an event which results in community rejoicing (1:58). Another appearance of *eleos* in the infancy narrative occurs towards the end of Zechariah's canticle. Through God's tender mercy (*splagchna eleous*), the "dawn from on high" will visit (*episkepsetai*), giving "light to those who sit in darkness" and guiding in the way of peace (1:78-79). God's mercy is specifically concerned with those most in need, raising the oppressed and promoting peace. *Splagchna* is a plural form and is combined with *eleous* (of mercy). The combination is rendered singular as "tender mercy" in the NRSV and is predicated "of our God". The plural form *splagchna* encapsulates the multi-dimensional character of God's compassion and mercy. Furthermore, the combination of *splagchna* (inward parts or entrails) and *eleous* (of mercy) has an intensifying effect, pointing to the depth of God's response. Anne Elvey suggests the evocative translation "the gut-felt mercies" of the divine (2011: 82), although "the inner depths of mercy" is closer to the original Greek.

The final appearance of the noun *eleos* in the Lukan Gospel occurs at the end of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan is described as "neighbour," showing mercy (*eleos*) to the one in need. Jesus' words, "Go and do likewise," are a call to his audience to participate in God's way of mercy, just as the Samaritan has done in the parable (10:36-37). Elsewhere in the Lukan Gospel, during the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus invites the crowd to be merciful (*oiktirmones*), in the same way as God is merciful (*oiktirmōn*; 6:36). While the adjective *oiktirmōn* comes from another mercy word group,

the instruction to be merciful in 6:36 is similar in meaning to the instruction in 10:36-37 to do likewise, to act like the one who shows mercy.

In the Gospel of Luke, therefore, God's mercy is embodied in Jesus, but there is also a call for others to be mercy. Those who experience God's mercy can then be a source of mercy for others. In Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Tabitha is portrayed as a woman who has followed Jesus' instruction to live a life of mercy (Acts 9:36, cf. Luke 10:37). She is full (*plērēs*) of works of justice (*ergōn agathōn*) and works of mercy (*eleēmosunōn*). Like the Samaritan, Tabitha provides a prototype for those who commit themselves to a mission of mercy and justice (Lawson 2005: 287-92).

Related to *eleos*, the verb *eleeō*, to have mercy or pity, also occurs in the Lukan Gospel. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the rich man cries out for Abraham to have mercy (*eleēson*) on him (16:24). In two later healing narratives, ten lepers and a blind beggar call out to Jesus to have mercy (*eleēson*) on them (17:13; 18:38-39). Jesus' response to the cry of the broken is to heal them (17:14; 18:42). Jesus embodies God's mercy for those in need of release.

A motif of visitation in the Gospel of Luke highlights the love and mercy of God, displayed by Jesus. *Episkepsetai*, which appears in 1:78, as mentioned above, is a form of the verb *episkeptomai*, "to visit". A different form of the same verb appears in 1:68, at the beginning of Zechariah's canticle. The theme of visitation also occurs explicitly in two other pericopes. Seeing Jesus raise the son of the widow at Nain, the crowd exclaims that God has visited God's people (7:16). They recognise God's action in Jesus. Later in the Gospel, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem for Jerusalem has not recognised the time of their visitation (19:44).

This motif of visitation promotes an understanding of Jesus as intimately connected with God's visitation of God's people. Hospitality becomes an essential element of this visitation. For Byrne, "those who do receive him [Jesus] find that he brings them into a much wider sphere of hospitality: the 'hospitality of God.'" (2000: 4). Jesus' ministry is concerned with proclaiming and embodying God's acceptance and love, God's extravagant hospitality. God's hospitality involves release from all that burdens, physically and socially. The motif of being "neighbour", seen in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:36), continues the imagery of hospitality.

The final Greek word-family to be explored is that of *charis* and its cognates. Twice in the LXX, Hebrew words for mercy are rendered as *charis*: translating *rachamim*, mercy, in Genesis 43:14 and translating *chesed*, loving kindness or steadfast love, in Esther 2:9. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, the related adjective "gracious" is used of God in parallel with a range of "mercy" words: "...a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (Exod 34:6-7). While *charis* may carry different nuances from the other "mercy" words in Luke, the parallels in the Hebrew Bible allow for some attention to this term in our reflection on mercy.

Charis meaning grace, favour, joy occurs eight times in the Gospel of Luke (1:30; 2:40, 52; 4:22; 6:32, 33, 34; 17:9). The angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary employs a related term, *kecharitōmenē*, favoured or grace-filled one (1:28). There may be an echo here of the way in which *chesed* is used of Esther who pleased and won the king's favour (*chesed*; Esther 2:9). Mary, the favoured or grace-filled one of God, is a woman of mercy.¹³

The first three occurrences of *charis* are also in the Infancy Narrative. Mary is said to have found favour (*charin*) with God (1:30). God's grace or favour (*charis*, *chariti*) is twice stated to be upon or with Jesus (2:40, 52). At the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus proclaims in the synagogue, the crowd are amazed at the words of grace (*charitos*) that he spoke (4:22). Being informed from the Infancy Narrative that Jesus is filled with God's grace, the reader is not likely to be as amazed as the crowd that Jesus speaks words of grace. Filled with grace, Jesus can embody the hospitality of God's grace.

The next three appearances of *charis* (6:32, 33, 34), used in the sense of "credit", occur in the course of Jesus' teaching about love of enemies (6:27-36). This passage culminates in the call to be merciful (*oiktirmones*) as God is merciful (*oiktirmōn*; 6:36). The final use of *charis* is in the context of a slave parable (17:7-10). Does the slave have credit (*charis*) for doing what was commanded? (17:9). The use of *mē* expects the answer "no" to this question. This parable, along with others in the Lukan Gospel, presumes the first-century Greco-Roman context in which slavery was an accepted and embedded institution without challenge. There is a sense, then, in which the Gospel reinscribes the oppressive social structures of its historical context. Readers today might question how they unintentionally reinscribe oppressive practices even as they oppose those practices. The buying of products which have been produced by slave labour is one way in which this occurs.

Another Lukan story comes to mind at this point, that of a woman bent over being healed by Jesus and empowered to stand up straight (13:10-13). The woman has a spirit of infirmity that has crippled her for eighteen years so that she is unable to stand erect (13:11). Her illness can symbolise all that burdens and breaks the vulnerable.

Jesus' words to her epitomise his ministry: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" (13:12). Jesus relieves the woman of her burden so that she is empowered to stand up of her own accord (13:13).¹⁴

Like the bent over woman, the Earth community needs to be released from its burdens so that the pieces, wherever they are broken, might be formed again into a whole. This can only happen through the power of God's Spirit in whom the entire creation has its being. Finally, we must not forget our own brokenness and dependence on the womb compassion, steadfast love, and graciousness of God in our lives.

In the context of her Nobel Lecture delivered on June 16, 2012, more than twenty years after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi challenged her audience by asking "Can we afford to indulge in compassion fatigue?" Lack of compassion, from her perspective, equates to lack of concern. She concludes: "Ultimately our aim should be to create a world free from the displaced, the homeless and the hopeless, a world of which each and every corner is a true sanctuary where the inhabitants will have the freedom and the capacity to live in peace" (2012). We recall again the canticle of Zechariah in the Gospel of Luke which speaks of the inner depths of the mercy (*splagchna eleous*) of our God through which the Earth community receives the visitation of the dawn from on high, "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (1:78-79).

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¹ As will become evident, the title for this paper has its origins in the 2011 Chapter of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Our paper represents an expansion of a short reflection prepared by the authors to accompany the distribution of the Chapter material.

² For an excellent comment on the complexities of this issue, see Fatima Measham (2012).

³ It is the whole Earth community that is in need of release and not only the human community. We have developed a new consciousness in our times of our interconnectedness with all of creation.

⁴ Since 2005, Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea have endeavoured to raise awareness about and focus their engagement on four specific mercy and justice "issues": eco-justice; indigenous issues; women and poverty; and asylum seekers and refugees. See <http://institute.mercy.org.au/> for further details.

⁵ The Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia was dissolved and the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG) came into being on December 12, 2011 in the context of a Chapter held in Baulkham Hills, Sydney. The members of fifteen separate and distinct congregations joined together to form the new Institute. The Chapter is the highest governing body of the Institute.

⁶ A booklet entitled *Engaging Our Wisdom Traditions: A Crucial Step Between Consultations on our Reconfiguring Journey, August-September, 2008* was compiled to provide material for engaging our Mercy and biblical traditions.

⁷ The authors of this paper were both delegates to the Chapter.

⁸ See, for instance, Elvey (2011) and Wainwright (2012).

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁰ When the Lukan Peter makes reference to Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit and his mission to the oppressed (Acts 10:38), a different term for "the oppressed" is employed, namely *katadunasteuomenous*. Stephen's speech (Acts 7:24) uses *adikoumenon*, in other words a person who has been wronged or treated unjustly.

¹¹ Various categories, such as gender, class and location, affect the level of power or lack of power and the associated vulnerability of an individual.

¹² Dowling also notes the widow's passivity and silence in this narrative (2007: 144-146).

¹³ A feminist perspective alerts us to ways in which the Lukan Infancy Narrative highlights the faithfulness and prophetic characterisation of women, at the same time as it somewhat marginalises the women's public voice (Dowling 2007: 119-41).

¹⁴ Elements of this story can also reinforce the association of women in the Lukan Gospel with malevolent spirits and their reduced roles in the narrative. For more detail, see Dowling (2007: 167-69).