

Jubilee Year of Mercy

Ambrose Mong

In March 2015, Pope Francis proclaimed the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which was to begin on 8 December 2015 and will end on 20 November 2016. He is “convinced that the whole church can find in this jubilee the joy of rediscovering and making fruitful the mercy of God, with which we are all called to give consolation to every man and every woman of our time.” This declaration provides the universal church a unique opportunity for reflection and repentance. Jubilee years have their origins in the Old Testament and were important religious events connected to universal pardons and reconciliation. The Book of Leviticus (25:8 - 13) recounts the following:

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the Day of Atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property.

As mentioned above, this special period was celebrated every 50 years in which slaves and prisoners were set free, debts forgiven and God’s mercy was revealed. The church revived that tradition in

the year 1300 under Pope Boniface VIII. Since that time, there have been 29 Jubilees or Holy Years.

The 50th year of Jubilee was to be a year of grace, an opportunity to restore peace and order in the land. It was meant to bring greater justice, and liberation for the community as well as the rest of God's people. The Jubilee was seen as a type of Exodus, a freeing from slavery. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet repeats this proclamation of favour and liberation in chapter 61. In Luke's Gospel (4:18 -19), Jesus quotes Isaiah to inaugurate his own ministry:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*

Ever since his election on March 13, 2013, Pope Francis has been called the Pope of Mercy. He has frequently emphasized that the God of Mercy wants to save people rather than to condemn them. Mercy is a theme that he has brought up again and again in his homilies and talks throughout the past two years. Francis told journalists on the flight back from Rio de Janeiro on July 28, 2013, "I believe that this is the season of mercy." "The church is a mother: she has to go out to heal those who are hurting, with mercy," he said. "If the Lord never tires of forgiving, we have no other choice than this: first of all, to care for those who are hurting."

Pope Francis again spoke of the need to show mercy in his homily to the new cardinals on February 15, when he concelebrated Mass with them in St. Peter's Basilica. He recalled then that "the church's way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy" "The way of the church is not to condemn anyone for eternity." "It is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart."

In a biblical sense, the Jubilee is also a year of liberation, to set captives free. Pope Francis reminds the church and individual

Christians that we are to publicly proclaim the liberation of slaves, of those who are downtrodden and oppressed. In our times, this includes exploited labourers, child labourers, migrants, those forced into prostitution, and victims of kidnapping. The church can be a beacon that reveals the darkness of slavery and of the exploitation of labour in our society. As church, we need to work together to fight for the just treatment of immigrants and refugees.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus extends his fulfilment of the Jubilee beyond the borders of Israel. In the same manner, Pope Francis has made many fruitful gestures towards dialogue with other Christian churches, Protestants and Orthodox communities, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. The Pope reminds the church that the Holy Spirit can bring unity to areas of conflict and tension. This also means that we have to get out of our comfort zone to reach out to those at the margins and peripheries of our society. We are called upon to celebrate the Jubilee as community to establish a more compassionate and merciful society, to reach out to those who have been marginalized and exploited.

The church, if it is to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, himself a marginal Jew, must be a "marginal church," in the sense of moving closer to the edges of the world where the outcast and downtrodden dwell. Pope Francis speaks of a church that should live on the edge: "The precious oil which anoints the head of Aaron does more than simply lend fragrance to his person; it overflows down to 'the edges.' The Lord will say this clearly: his anointing is meant for the poor, prisoners and the sick, for those who suffer in sorrow and are alone."¹ Down to "the edges" suggests that the church must be present in the "existential peripheries" in order to avoid becoming a "a self-referential church."² The church would serve better if its ministers imitate their master, the marginal Jew, who went to the social and religious peripheries of society.

¹ Pope Francis, Chrism Mass, March 28, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html/.

² Massimo Faggioli, "Vatican II and the church of the margins," *Theological Studies* 74, no. 4 (December 1, 2013), 817.

Pope Francis appeals to Christians, clergy and laity alike, to reject the false temptation of gossip, greed and corruption. Gossip destroys the fabric of our community and makes reconciliation and forgiveness difficult. The Jubilee is thus an opportunity for us to renew our commitment to seek reconciliation with God and our neighbours through the sacraments. We need to nurture in our community the practice of forgiveness, penance and restitution. Forgiveness is rooted in the cross and the resurrection: we can forgive because God has forgiven us.

At the personal level, the celebration of Jubilee gives us the courage and grace to forgive those who have offended us just as God has been merciful and has forgiven us in spite of our repeated failures to be faithful to his command to love. The year of mercy can become an opportunity for us to forgive 70 times seven times. Let us also prepare ourselves to accept forgiveness from others. This year of Jubilee is an invitation for us to put our possessions and power at the service of those in need; in other words, to carry out works of mercy.

Pastoral Letter for the Jubilee of Mercy

At our local church level, John Cardinal Tong, in his pastoral letter for the Jubilee of Mercy, on 29 November, 2015, said the following: “The opening of the Holy Door of the Jubilee of Mercy encourages Catholics to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, to participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, to adore the Blessed Sacrament and to receive a plenary indulgence.” The purpose of these activities is “to help everyone to carefully receive the unlimited mercy of God, to obtain his forgiveness, to become reconciled with others and to be willing to forgive those who have harmed us.”

Cardinal Tong reminds us that “we should not let our sufferings make us close our eyes and make us forgetful of other people around us. They may be harmed by our coldness, unconcern, selfishness and even superiority complex. In the midst of our own sufferings, let us first think of the sufferings of others and extend the hand of friendship to them.” He reminds all the faithful in Hong Kong to participate actively in the diocesan and parish activities

that mark the Jubilee of Mercy. Cardinal Tong wants us to make an effort to reduce the gap between the rich and poor, to show concern for the marginalized and the poor.

Holy Door in Hong Kong is open

On December 12, 2015, at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, John Cardinal Tong inaugurated the Jubilee of Mercy in the Diocese. He prayed “Glory to you, Lord, merciful and kind, slow to anger and abounding in mercy,” before calling on all present to fix their eyes on the merciful face of Jesus. As Pope Francis opened the Jubilee of Mercy at St Peter’s Basilica in Rome on December 8, here in Hong Kong, Cardinal Tong inaugurated the Extraordinary Jubilee by opening for us the door of God’s mercy. He described the moment “as a prelude to the profound experience of grace and reconciliation that awaits the Church this year, praying to God, the author of true freedom, who desires to gather the whole human race into one people unshackled from the chains of slavery, to make the Church a brilliantly shining sacrament of salvation.”

Beneath the door, the words, The Home of the Church, the Gateway to Heaven, have been inscribed in Chinese and Latin. It encourages people to pass through in search of mercy and forgiveness. Cardinal Tong prayed, “Open the gates of justice, we shall enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the Lord’s gate, let us enter through it to obtain mercy and forgiveness.”

After the prayers, a procession headed by representatives of different nationalities reflecting the universality of the church and the multi-ethnic nature of our local church in Hong Kong, moved into the cathedral. While sprinkling water on the congregation, Cardinal Tong prayed that the water would purify and open the hearts of people to receive forgiveness for their sins. He also prayed to Mary, the Mother of God, asking her to intercede for us especially during this Holy Year so that we may rediscover once again the tender mercy of our God.

A Lenten message from our bishop

In his Lenten message, John Cardinal Tong tells us that “Lent is a special period when we strive to make further progress in

attaining Christian perfection and to bring about the kingdom of God through a more devout practice of prayer, fasting and works of charity.” He reminds us that as the Church is now celebrating the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy and the Door of Mercy is wide open, the season of Lent this year offers an opportunity to learn “to be merciful as our Heavenly Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

In this Pastoral Letter, Cardinal Tong wishes to share with us some thoughts on how to participate fruitfully in this sacrament. The first step in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to listen to the Word of the Lord. The parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel according to Saint Luke (15:11-32) “provides us with rich material for reflection and contemplation on the tenderness of our Heavenly Father.” The Cardinal says “this tenderness moves us to approach him with confidence through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which can reawaken in ourselves the joy of salvation (Psalm 51).” This parable also teaches us how “to set ourselves free from frustrations arising from desolation, confusion and fear or resentment, thereby regaining hope.”

Easter pastoral letter from our bishop: To be ambassadors of mercy and reconciliation

The teaching of Pope Francis on mercy and forgiveness reminds John Cardinal Tong of a touching story recorded in an ancient narrative, the *Zuo Zhuan* (Historical Commentary according to Zuo), from “Duke Yin, first year” (722 BC):

After Duke Zhuang ascended to be the head of state, his younger brother Duan failed to overthrow him and fled. Duke Zhuang learnt that his mother helped Duan in the attempt and angrily said to her: “We won’t see each other until we meet in the underworld!”

Afterwards, Duke Zhuang realised he should not have said those words and deeply regretted them. At a dinner, senior official Ying Kaoshu deliberately left a piece of meat untouched, saying: “I want to bring it back to my mother. She has never eaten any food granted by the emperor.”

Duke Zhuang was moved and said, “You are blessed. You can take care of your mother. I have no chance!” Then, Ying Kaoshu made a suggestion for the emperor to meet his mother. They finally met in a tunnel underground, were reconciled and lived happily together again.

Both Duke Zhuang and Ying Kaoshu are lauded as sons of filial piety, especially the former for his courage to be reconciled. To me, they were examples of ambassadors of mercy and reconciliation in ancient China.

In view of this call for reconciliation, Cardinal Tong says, “let us always remember to give a smile to our families, neighbours, classmates, colleagues and even strangers. This interaction may have a mutual effect. We can express to others this image and likeness of the merciful face of Christ and spread it around!”

In response to Pope Francis’ appeal, the Hong Kong diocese launched a 24-hour period of prayer dedicated to the merciful Father on March 4 and 5, 2016. On those two days, parishes arranged for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and also for priests to hear confessions. Many Catholics took this opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Cardinal hopes that this excellent response will become a regular practice for all faithful. He wants us to become ambassadors of mercy and reconciliation by imitating the merciful Father and forgiving those who oppose us.