

MERCY OUR NAME, BUT WHY THE CROSS?

I WAS sitting at Auckland airport, waiting for my flight home after a meeting of our mission team, when I caught sight of a young Asian dad, with a three-year-old in tow. What struck me most was his sweatshirt, with its slogan “No Mercy”. Perhaps because I had just spent more than a day with colleagues reflecting on Mercy and its vision, the message on the sweatshirt seemed incongruous, even menacing. I worried at the prospects of this toddler with his ‘no mercy’ dad, hoping that he did nothing to push the limits or test the boundaries of a parent who might be slow to make any concessions.

Then, of course, I realised that the slogan was probably unrelated to parenting skills. An online search quickly revealed that “No Mercy” includes a franchise that specialises in sports apparel – t-shirts, shorts and shoes – for young basketball players. The brand encourages them to put their best foot forward, to strive for excellence on the court, and to aim aggressively at being winners with every move they make, in every match they play.

But the airport encounter got me thinking about how we express our commitment to Mercy – the symbols and logos we use, and why we choose them. In New Zealand, Mercy’s registered trademark, listed since 2008 with the Commissioner of Patents, Trade Marks and Designs, is the Mercy Cross. Wearing the cross as a badge or medallion is the exclusive privilege and right of Sisters of Mercy. Others may use the design, with the appropriate permission, to promote the sisters’ identity or mission. Most of our ministries carry the name ‘Atawhai’ or ‘Mercy’ in their title, and a stylised but identifiable version of the cross in their logo.

‘Why the cross?’ you may ask. It links us directly to the international family, founded in 1831 by Mother Catherine McAuley. The ‘cross of Christ’ is the most frequent reference in all her hundreds of published letters. It was the image which she and her ‘walking sisters’ wore as their first steps led them through the streets of Dublin and the other Irish towns where they went in search of the poor and sick.

The cross was a symbol of their willingness to care and serve. The white cross on its dark background which Catherine chose was unique in its day, in that it had no figure nailed to its outline. Her sisters were instructed to recognise Christ in the suffering they found in the streets and houses they visited. In reaching out to their sisters

and brothers in need, it was Christ whom they were serving.

Generations of Christians have come – wrongly, it seems – to regard the cross as the price which the sinless Jesus had to pay, to settle the debt for humanity’s sin against the all-perfect God. This theological myth has been skilfully laid to rest by US theologian Elizabeth Johnson in her latest work, *Creation and the Cross*. She argues that what came to be known as the ‘satisfaction theory’, first proposed by St Anselm in the eleventh century, has meant that countless Christian scholars and believers have held to the view that Christ had to die on the cross in order to make good the infinite offence that had been committed against God.

Not so, insists Elizabeth Johnson. The merciful God whom Jesus revealed would never exact such a vengeful price for human frailty. Instead, she suggests, the cross is the overwhelming sign that God accompanies Jesus on every step of his journey through a violent and unjust death, into the light of resurrection and new life. The cross is the ultimate sign of God’s faithful and merciful love. No death goes without the Creator noticing and responding with compassionate and tender love; not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the Father of Jesus being aware and attentive.

St Anselm’s ‘satisfaction theory’ gained traction because of the feudal system in which he lived, when human dignity waxed and waned depending

on where one stood on the social scale of the time.

A hurt done to a milkmaid was of far less significance than an insult to a lady of the court; and the price paid by the offender was likely to vary as well. To find a different starting-point, Elizabeth Johnson goes not to the gospels and the story of Jesus, but to the Old Testament and

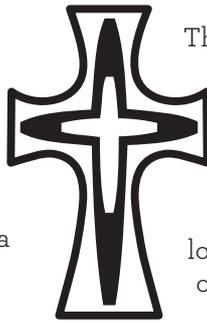


*Mercy to Earth: poster created by
Mercy International Association,
for Year of Mercy © 2017*

the anonymous prophet known as Second Isaiah, writing five centuries before Jesus and familiar to us especially from our Advent liturgies and his famous message to the Jewish people in their years of bitter exile: “Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God.” (Isaiah 40:1) It is a message of hope to a people who have fallen on hard times, far from home and feeling utterly abandoned.

A major part of *Creation and the Cross* explores how Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecies contained in Second Isaiah, especially in its famous Servant poems, in which the disciples of Jesus saw so much of his story prefigured, particularly his sufferings and death and above all his resurrection. There is no dwelling on pain in this story, Johnson writes, “but only the gospel message that the gracious, liberating God of Israel, God of the Exodus and return from exile, has acted again in an unimaginable way to restore new life out of someone’s unjust execution, which spills over into blessings for all: the good news about Jesus.” (p. 151)

But God’s saving work does not end with the resurrection of Jesus; in a sense it is only just beginning. Christ is “the firstborn of all creation,” (Colossians 1:15-20). Where he has gone, the rest of the natural world will follow. God’s compassionate presence in the midst of death means that creatures are never alone in their pain and dying. “This unfathomable divine presence means that they are accompanied in their anguish and dying with a love that does not snap off just because they are in trouble. The cross gives warrant for locating the compassion of God right at the centre of their affliction. The indwelling Spirit of God, the Spirit of the crucified Christ, does not abandon them in the moment of trial but companions them into death.



Mercy NZ's
registered
trade mark.

The field mouse does not die alone.” (p.189)

Elizabeth Johnson writes convincingly of how God continues to embrace the work of creation as it groans in its ongoing process of giving birth and labouring to completion. The mystery of God’s love, revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, can be glimpsed in the struggles of what this author describes as “a planet in peril”, held in the loving hands of a God who saves. The resurrection of Jesus is good news, not just for humanity but for all life and the whole of creation, in spite of climate change and environmental destruction on a global scale.

So the mission statement on our walls and websites, announcing mercy through each and all of our ministries, is not meant to be a glib, empty promise. And the cross that goes with the slogan is our way of saying that God is close wherever people are challenged or hurting. Whether it is illness borne in one of our healthcare facilities, or the search by young women to find a way forward through Mercy education, or the battle faced by women – often on their own – to parent well and provide for their

families, the word is that God is there, accompanying them in their struggle and promising to turn darkness and doubt into new and abundant life.

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

Reflect on your own or with a colleague on the following two questions. Be prepared to share your responses with a larger group, if you have the chance.

- *Where in the ministry with which you are involved is the Mercy cross principally displayed? Do you know by whom this image was designed or created?*
- *To explain the significance of the cross for your Mercy ministry, how would you respond in two or three sentences?*

– **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer **From cross to new life**

*E te Atua Kaiwetewete
God who comes to liberate:
You accompanied Jesus on
his journey to the cross;
you set him free from
the bonds of death
and filled him with new life.*

*Accompany us too in your grace
and set us free from whatever
seeks to keep us bound.
Lift us up when we fall.
Bring the whole of creation
to the abundant life
for which Jesus is the way.*

*Have compassion on our Earth
as it groans in labour,
bring to completion all that
waits to be saved and made whole.
Make us pain-bearers and life-givers
as we seek to bring mercy
to all who wait for your love. Amen.*