

ADVENT: HOW ARE WE BEING CALLED TO LIVE DIFFERENTLY?

With great ceremony, Pope Francis has closed the holy doors in St Peter's to mark the end of his special Year of Mercy. Other doors, like those in Wellington's Sacred Heart Cathedral which give entry to the Blessed Sacrament chapel will remain permanently open, reminding those who enter and leave that God's mercy is never ending.

And this month, as our Mercy world celebrates another Foundation Day, sisters and partners in mission will gather in venues throughout New Zealand and the Pacific to give thanks for the Year of Mercy and to reflect on the fact that what has been opened and poured out in mercy and love can never be stopped. 'Kia tuwhera tonu mai ngā Kūaha o te Atawhai - keep the doors of mercy wide open' is the refrain participants will proclaim.

The celebrations will take place in Advent, the season of waiting for another Christmas, which looks back to the first incarnation in ways that expect this great mystery of God's love to be repeated in our own day and in times to come. That Christ may take flesh anew is our constant prayer, with our symbol a fresh green Advent wreath that is open to this possibility. And we cannot pray sincerely without resolving to make the promise happen. Christ will take flesh in our time only if we allow this to happen.

The message of Pope Francis in this Year of Mercy has been that the church must renew its own pastoral structures, to allow God's mercy to flow more easily to wherever it is needed.

He has also insisted that the larger world beyond the church needs to adapt social, economic and environmental practices so that the cry of the Earth may be heard and responded to. How as a nation can we justify spending billions of dollars on new prisons, when our child poverty rates remain so high? Can we hope to honour commitments made in Paris to reduce climate change while we are still keen to support offshore oil, gas and mineral exploration? And are we doing enough to support our neighbours in the Pacific where vulnerable communities are having to deal with coastal erosion and rising sea levels?



MANGOES in one of Samoa's very own bio-bags, now produced by the government and some local supermarkets.



Chinese cabbage plants at Paul VI College, Samoa, the first stage of a new organic garden with a focus on sustainability and use of local resources.

As part of their response to the Year of Mercy, about 20 groups throughout New Zealand and the Pacific have spent weeks and months engaged in a worldwide reflection process, sponsored by the Mercy International Association. The carefully constructed process has invited groups to work through four distinct but connected steps, beginning with a sharing of issues of concern to identify a single focus, drawing inspiration from our wisdom traditions and concluding with a clear plan of action. Critical questions for groups to address include 'what are we being called to do differently, or how are we being called to live differently, as a result of our analysis?', 'what can we do locally, and when will we evaluate such action?', 'how will we know when we have achieved this?'.

Several of our groups have focused on plastic in the environment and on ways to recycle or reduce our dependence on this material. One such group, at St Joan of Arc School in Leulumoega, Samoa, has invited teachers and parents to focus on using biodegradable alternatives to plastic and tin-foil. “We hope the action stage will take us beyond the Year of Mercy,” says Sister of Mercy Malia Fetuli, “and lead to a change of mind-set about daily living.”

Next door to her school, Paul VI College is taking up the challenge to develop organic vegetable gardens. The new project will be implemented in the Agriculture-Science course from next year, with support from the principal and teachers. “With help from a couple of past pupils, I am also starting a garden with crops like pineapples, bananas and taro next year,” Malia adds. “We will produce our own organic vegetables.”

One cannot listen to the cry of the Earth in our part of the world without becoming aware of the damage caused to Papatuanuku by plastic. Take a look at the Great Pacific Garbage Patch on YouTube, for instance. Sometimes known as the Pacific trash vortex and thought to be six times the size of France, this is a swirling mass of discarded plastic bags and bottles, described on one website as a thick soup of plastic gloop in the north-eastern reaches of the Pacific Ocean. And a quote with which to end: “every single piece of plastic that has ever been created since the 19th century is still somewhere on our planet. So if you throw yours away, where does it go?”

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

You are invited to end this reflection by pondering, either alone or with someone who shares your commitment to Mercy, on these questions:

- *What would be for you the most powerful sign of Christ coming once more into our world this Christmas? What change would you have to make for this to happen?*
- *How has the Mercy ministry in which you are involved changed during the Year of Mercy that has just concluded? Name the change that delights you most. Do you think this will continue? What needs to happen for this to occur?*
- *In your view, how is Mercy calling us to live in the future? How might we need to change, for this to happen? What might be one change you could resolve to make in this Advent season of preparing for another Christmas?*

– **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

Beatitudes for our times

Blessed are those who remain faithful, enduring evils inflicted on them by others, yet forgiving them from their heart.

Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalised, and show them their closeness.

Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to help others also discover God.

Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home.

Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort, in order to help others.

Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians.

Praised be God, who comes to set us free, and to make all things new!

– **Pope Francis, All Saints Day 2016, Malmo, Sweden (slightly adapted)**