

Forgiveness – the crack that lets the light in

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! Keynote speaker at a Mercy conference in Auckland last month was Sister of Mercy Elizabeth Davis from Newfoundland, speaking on *Daring Mercy in the 21st Century*. The graphics she used to illustrate her presentation included several familiar images of koru, the unfolding tip of the New Zealand fern. But one that came from her own homeland was a picture of an inuksuk, the stone landmark or cairn created in ancient times by the Inuit, in Canada's Arctic region where they lived. The inuksuk served perhaps as a marker for travel routes or hunting grounds, or maybe to identify a food cache.

Sister Elizabeth told of visiting an Inuit settlement and asking a young man there to describe the significance of the inuksuk. "Sister," was his reply, "what you need to know above all is that it's made only from broken pieces." His poignant response finds an echo in the chorus of Leonard Cohen's song *Anthem*,

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Our theme this month is forgiveness, God's gift to a humanity that is in some ways radically flawed but which, when transformed by that gift, is capable of shining with a light that brightens our world wherever it is allowed to reach. In his book *Mercy*, Cardinal Walter Kasper describes forgiveness as 'a creative new beginning that cannot be derived from the world.' The forgiveness and reconciliation that have followed some of the great ethnic and political conflicts of our day involve 'something' that is transcendent

Mercy given and received

Kia whakapaingia to tatou Atua atawhai;
pūmau tonu nei ana mahi tohu!
Give thanks to our God who is gracious;
whose mercy endures for ever!

As Catherine McAuley instructs us,
mercy receives the ungrateful again and again,
and never wearies in pardoning them.
May we learn from her witness
never to tire in offering forgiveness
to those who have upset or hurt us,
refusing to let bitterness take root.

May our ministries lead us to the periphery
of our world, where great changes are likely
when the gifts we share let in the light,
shining through the cracks that show in
the fragile communities we stand with
as mercy is given and received. Amen.

Imaging Mercy Today



THE inuksuk or stone cairn built centuries ago by Canada's Inuit people as a landmark and used by Sister of Mercy Elizabeth Davis in her presentation at a Mercy conference in Auckland last month. Each of the stone pieces is broken.

to us. 'Consciously or unconsciously, we are grasping after that which theologically is called grace and which scripture testifies is God's infinite mercy.' (p 204)

No one knew better than our foundress, Catherine McAuley, how elusive that gift of unqualified forgiveness can be. As she pleaded in a letter to her dear friend Frances Warde in Carlow, "Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from me. I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment. May God forgive me and make me humble before he calls me into his presence."

Her biographer Mary C Sullivan rsm notes that there were two chief causes for Catherine to be provoked to resentment at that time: one was a lengthy dispute with Dr Walter Meyler over chaplaincy at Baggot Street; the other was a legal judgment against her over the Kingstown property, in which the parish priest Fr Bartholomew Sheridan had reneged on earlier assurances of financial help.

There's a line in her famous *Suscipe* which hints at how deeply these resentments threatened to take root: 'Take from my heart all painful anxiety'. In the chapter of her biography which bears the title of that prayer, Mary Sullivan notes that with the deaths of five young Sisters of Mercy, fatiguing travels and these two severe clerical controversies, 1837 was probably one of the hardest years of her life. And that it was perhaps at this time that the *Suscipe* began to take shape.

It is by facing our need to be forgiving and forgiven that we mirror best that gift which God promises to all who seek it. To practise mercy well, we must keep company with those whose lives are cracked enough to let the light in. Says Pope Francis in a quote shared by Elizabeth Davis, 'I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history are realised when reality is seen not from the centre, where one's viewpoint is equidistant from everything, but from the periphery.' - Dennis Horton

