

Imaging Mercy Today

To Easter's sunlight after Lenten rains

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! Our lives are played out on a global scale these days. The earthquake in Christchurch in February seemed catastrophic until events in Japan last month dwarfed our seismic disaster, both by the intensity of the shake and the tsunami it created, and the untold numbers of lives lost and thrown into confusion. Yet though the scale may differ, the human reality is exactly the same – grief at losing the people and possessions we value, the struggle to lift our spirits and start again.

And welling from the hearts of so many, a desire to reach out to help, captured no better than by the glimpse of New Zealand rescue teams ending their work in Christchurch, flying out to start all over again somewhere in Japan. It's that ability to reach out to the stranger in need and find a friend that provides the glue which bonds our humanity together. There too is the energy that revitalizes mission, allowing God's transforming love to work in our world.

As visiting lecturer Fr Tony Gittins told us recently, conversion takes us from idolizing our own life through an encounter with people who are different from us. Christianity spread rapidly in the first three centuries, he said, because those early disciples held so firmly to the command to love God and neighbour.

'But neighbour clearly had a double significance, of loving

both those you know and those you haven't yet met,' says Fr Gittins. 'If you love only those who are like you, you're not really being converted. But if you are truly looking to the other, as someone who is different from yourself and who can reflect to you who you are in a way that you could never do for yourself, then you're onto it!'

It has been in large measure Fr Gittins' own ministry to homeless women in Chicago which has sustained and shaped his theological reflection for the past 28 years, and enabled him to draw family and friends to find inspiration for their lives, as well. It's by reaching out to the other that our great adventure in faith is likely to take off and to grow.



PRINCE William with mayor Bob Parker in Christchurch last month. The prince has named the Christchurch quake appeal as one of the charities to be supported by those wanting to acknowledge his marriage to Kate Middleton later this month. (Photo: Getty Images)

From Lenten ashes to new life

Though the mountains may fall
and the hills turn to dust,
yet you are all-seeing, e Io Mata Nui,
and nothing drops without your knowing.
From the chaos of a world still unfolding,
we look to you for wisdom and strength.

Make us wise to care for all in need:
our sisters and brothers close at hand,
and the strangers left homeless in far-off lands.
Let us harness Earth's energy with care,
aware of nature's power to destroy what we make
and of the frailty of what we build to last.

Give us strength to restore what we can,
to let go, when we must, of what cannot be kept.
Comfort us with the truth that here we have
no lasting city or enduring home.
May the monuments we leave
shine from the lives we have touched.

Help us to cherish treasure that endures,
knowing that it is only love that we will
take with us into your abiding presence.
Turn our Lenten ashes into signs of new life,
as we rise in Easter light, with fresh hope to share.
Mauri ora. Amen.

No one knew better than Catherine McAuley that there is never an ideal time for leaping into the unknown. But it is the urgency of the other's need, and not the perceived adequacy of our means, which must precipitate the leap. Listen to her chiding the superior she left to nurture the Charleville foundation when the going got tough: 'What could excuse us for casting off any charge which we had freely undertaken, except compelled by necessity to do so? Are not the poor of Charleville as dear to God as elsewhere?.. I am grieved to find such faint-hearted symptoms amongst us. Put your whole confidence in God, who will never let you want necessities for yourself or children.'

None of us has had to go looking for crosses to carry this Lent; they've been there, staring us in the eye. But in reaching out to embrace the other, we find our own lives are changed too. As Grey district mayor Tony Kokshoorn said in advance of welcoming Prince William to the West Coast, 'November 24 was our darkest day; our world changed forever. And I know there are people in Christchurch and Japan who are feeling the same as I did. But I want to tell you we are matching those [miners'] families stride for stride. There is always sunshine after the rain.' - Dennis Horton