



Lord have mercy

a reflection for Prisons Week 2016

PRISONS WEEK

I wonder how you feel about tattoos. There are some people who say that Christians really shouldn't have tattoos, and I can understand that point of view, because it is in some ways not respecting the body which is made in God's image. But if you work or live in prisons, then you have to get used to tattoos pretty quickly.

I have a small First Communion class after Mass on Sundays in the prison where I work. One week we were looking at the beautiful parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. I think it has so much to teach both people who think they know everything about the bible or the Church and what it teaches, and also people who feel that they can never dare to cross the step of a church. At the end of the class, a prisoner said to me "Father, when I get out of prison I'm going to have the words 'God be merciful to me a sinner' tattooed on my arm so that I will never forget them."

Mercy must be an indelible part of our Christian life. We can never wipe it out to get rid of it. Yes, indeed, God is a God of justice, but he is also a God of mercy. If he were not, I think we would all be in trouble. We must never be like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, apparently offended by his father's merciful love. His reaction is so human, but the mercy of God is divine.

So many of us begin our worship, week by week, with the words "Lord, have mercy". It is the theme of Prisons Week 2016. This year, 2016, has been declared the Year of Mercy by Pope Francis. Mercy unites Christians of every background, and it must be the bedrock of all that we do in prison.

We must encourage people to seek out the forgiveness of God, and challenge the thought which says I can't come close to God because I have done such terrible things. As Pope Francis says, the church is not here to condemn people, but to give them an encounter with the love that is God's mercy.

We must all pray this week that God's mercy will be made known to all who seek it: to those who have committed crime; to those whose lives have been scarred by crime; to those who administer justice in our country. We must put our prayer into action and in the words of Pope Francis say "(Mercy) does not mean that we should throw open the doors of the prison...but it means we have to help people who have fallen, to get back up."

You may not be about to get the words 'God be merciful to me a sinner' tattooed on your arm, but we all need to make mercy the absolute centre of all that we do in the name of Jesus Christ.

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