

**A Pastoral Letter  
for the  
Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy  
from the Catholic Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand**

***Be merciful like God the Father***  
cf. Lk 6:36

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Soon all of us - our faith communities of parishes and their schools and colleges, our Catholic marae, our social services and various chaplaincies – will celebrate together with the universal Church a Jubilee Year of Mercy. It will be a year of deep spiritual renewal, boundless forgiveness, and liberating service in our neighbourhoods, especially among those who suffer or struggle most.

Mercy speaks of the very nature of God. We grapple to define it, for it brings us face to face with the mystery of God's own being and actions. Yet we all recognise the times we have experienced mercy and, in the depths of our hearts, we all truly desire to be more merciful to others.

Our world, however, sometimes shows a hardened heart. The poor, minorities, those who do not conform to social norms are often seen as a nuisance, or are oppressed or even despised. Even more widespread is a prevailing culture of greed that treats other people as stepping stones rather than fellow human beings worthy of respect, and a listening and learning ear.

Within this context Pope Francis has declared a Jubilee Year of Mercy. Already his initiative has attracted great enthusiasm. Rightly we sense that the power of mercy is a power for good, a power that springs from our faith, a power that stems from and leads to our loving God. Mercy resonates deep within us, as the baptized and confirmed People of God.

So, why a Jubilee Year? It is in the book of Leviticus - chapters 25 and 26 - that we learn about Jubilee Years. We encourage you to read these two chapters of the Old Testament. You may well be surprised at what you learn. Jubilee years are not a kind of soft, sanctimonious, experience. They are about justice and forgiveness, right relationship with God, with one another, and with the land. We learn in reading Leviticus that Jubilee Years bring God's expectations of us into the nitty gritty of farming practices, land utilization, the property market, wages and salaries, debt relief, the setting of invoices and bills. When lived well, a Jubilee Year is a practical experience of the restoration of fairness and goodness, and therefore of grounded holiness where we experience the awe and joy of doing what is right in the eyes of God.

In one sense none of this is new. Yet we all recognize the need to be reminded from time to time to order our lives – our relationships at home, school and work, and our personal and family and community priorities and goals – in accordance with how Jesus wants us to be. Indeed, at the heart of the Jubilee Year is a renewed appreciation and respect for the Sabbath. For us, that is preserved in our commitment to participate and be nourished at Mass every Sunday and is brought home to us in the tough admittance that any excuse which pulls us away from Sunday Mass is nothing less than a false idol (cf. Leviticus 26:1-2).

What of mercy itself? The particular Jubilee we are about to live is cloaked in a wondrous korowai of God's mercy. This enkindles within us the desire and duty to be merciful as God's people. We are sure each of you cherishes in your heart examples of mercy at work. No doubt we are all beginning to imagine what difference a concentrated Year of Mercy will make as each of us tries to become an "oasis of mercy" (*Misericordiae Vultus* 12). In our history Te Rauparaha, usually remembered as a ruthless warrior and strategist, also demonstrated in his life the power of mercy. As soon as he had embraced the Christian faith he straight away understood the futility of the *utu* or revenge which had entrapped him, and so he set out to release Ngai Tahu captives from the imprisonment he had previously promoted.

The Church, since Pentecost, has built on the Old Testament foundations of God's mercy at work in history. Traditionally we have spoken of corporal or material works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, give alms to the poor, bury the dead; and spiritual works of mercy: counsel the confused, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead (cf. *MV* 15; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2447).

If each of us is to grow in mercy like the Father then first and foremost this Jubilee Year will be a time of conversion both individually and communally. What might a more merciful family or school or parish or workplace or diocese look like?

We are not here to give answers but let us all look to the example the Holy Father, Pope Francis, is giving us. The personal motto he had as Archbishop of Buenos Aires he has retained as Pope. It reads *miserando atque eligendo*, and comes from a homily of Saint Bede the Venerable (*Homily* 21) in which he is commenting on the extraordinary choice of Jesus to include Matthew - the unpopular and probably corrupt tax collector - among his Apostles. Why would Jesus choose Matthew? How could Jesus choose him? The answer lies in the heart of Jesus: filled with mercy, Jesus is able to see Matthew in a new light; filled with mercy our Lord comprehends the tax collector Matthew in a new way; filled with mercy Jesus recognizes within Matthew an already existing goodness to which others had been blind.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are delighted with this sacred year of grace, insight and action to which Pope Francis is calling the entire Church and, through us, offering to the entire world. We are already humbled by a growing sense that the fruits which this Year will bear will go far beyond our many hopes. May Mary, Mother of Mercy (*Mater Misericordiae*), St Peter Chanel, St Mary of the Cross Mackillop and the Servant of God Suzanne Aubert accompany and encourage us as we set forth as pilgrims stirred by a renewed resolve to be missionaries of forgiveness, justice and mercy.

Cardinal John Dew  
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President, NZCBC

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Bishop of Auckland  
Secretary, NZCBC

Bishop Stephen Lowe  
Bishop of Hamilton

Bishop Colin Campbell  
Bishop of Dunedin

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Bishop Peter Cullinane  
Emeritus Bishop of Palmerston North