

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 13, 2016

At the beginning of the Second Vatican Council 54 years ago, St. John XXIII said: "Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up the arms of security. The Catholic Church... wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness."

And then when the council ended, Blessed Paul VI said: "Charity has been the principal religious feature of this Council... a wave of affection and admiration flowed from the Council over the modern world of humanity."

So instead of a depressing diagnosis during a very troubled time in world history, we heard encouraging solutions. Instead of dire predictions in an age of unrest, the messages that came from the Council were ones of trust and mercy.

And it's this same message of mercy, hope, and solidarity with all of humankind that has come alive again in this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy that invites us to take another look at God and at God's face of mercy as it is revealed in the Bible, and ultimately in God's Word made flesh, in Jesus.

From Genesis to the Book of Revelation, the pages of the Bible are filled with examples of God's countless and undeserved acts of mercy for sinners. When Pope Francis called for this Year of Mercy he said, "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that God's is a visceral love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy."

This same instinctive love of God is underscored in each of today's readings. The author of Second Isaiah was a comforter of his people and their companion during their

years of exile in Babylon. He promised that God would repeat the wonders of their exodus from Egypt and lead the Israelites home.

When the circumstances threatened their hope and it seemed that all was lost, God, with great mercy, encouraged the people not to dwell on or drown in the sins of their past: "I am doing something new!" This newness meant forgiveness and reconciliation for all who would welcome God into their lives and would be faithfully responsive to God's overtures of love and mercy.

In his letter to his beloved Philippians, St. Paul shared his love for and his unwavering commitment to Jesus. It was an act of mercy that the risen Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus. And as a result of that encounter, Paul allowed himself to be transformed; the persecutor of Jesus' followers became the greatest preacher and witness to the good news of salvation.

He had become aware — and he shared that awareness with others — that salvation was not based on any righteousness of his own that came from the law, but on the merciful gift of God, mediated by Christ on the cross and appropriated by faith.

He knew that Christ had taken possession of him, and he strived to live every day of his life as an authentic reflection of the Lord to whom he belonged. As believers who strive to be authentic disciple's, we are recipients of the same mercies extended to Paul. Like him, we are to count all else as "rubbish" so as to gain Christ and to be found in him.

In today's Gospel reading from John, we witness the mercy of God living in the words and actions of Jesus. While others were willing and even eager to stone the woman for adultery, Jesus asked them to look within themselves, to see themselves for who they were — sinners.

He challenged them to look beyond the law, and to look to God. If they stood in truth before God, could they, in all honesty, condemn and execute a fellow sinner? How often had they known God's mercy? Shouldn't they allow the woman mercy, too?

Elsewhere in Luke's Gospel, Jesus would say, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you. In good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:36-38).

With these challenges of Jesus in mind, how will we tend to the poor who need and deserve our mercy? How will Jesus' words affect the manner in which we forgive those who wrong us? If we dare to pray to "Our Father" and profess to belong to Christ, then there can be no other way for us than the way of mercy.

Pope Francis reminds us that "This mercy of God is the beating heart of the gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. ... It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she live and testify to mercy."

We live in a complex and very conflicted world. We have to make value judgments all the time. But that is different from judging the lives and motives of others.

If we take away only one thought from our readings today, let it be this: "Let the one ... who is without sin cast the first stone." Judgment is mine, says the Lord. And we should all be eternally thankful that the judgment of God is accomplished with compassion and mercy.