

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

As many of you perhaps already know by this point, the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, which Pope Francis has called for, has now begun. The theme or title of this beautiful year is “Merciful like the Father” – focusing on God’s perfect and never-ending mercy for us.

In case you’re not familiar, the Christian celebration of a Jubilee, as a special year focusing of the remission of sins and universal pardon, has its origins in the Biblical book of Leviticus. There, a Jubilee year is mentioned to occur every fifty years, in which slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven and the mercies of God would be particularly manifested. The year of Jubilee in both the Jewish and Christian traditions is a time of joy – a time of forgiveness or universal pardon. In Catholic theology, a jubilee year is a special year called by the Church in order that people might seek God’s forgiveness in a pronounced way, make reparation for their sins, and deepen conversion in their lives. Since the year 1300 AD, they have typically been called every 25 or 50 years – the most recent being in the year 2,000. Special jubilee years, such as the one we’re currently in, which fall outside this regular rhythm, are called extraordinary. Unfortunately during these modern-day jubilee years, though, the banks and credit card companies don’t forgive our financial debts!

One important symbolic part of a Jubilee revolves around the “Holy Doors”, which are a special set of doors in certain designated churches that are symbolic reminders of the barrier of sin between human beings and God. During jubilee years, these doors, which are normally sealed from the inside with bricks, are opened for pilgrims to walk through. The symbolism comes to life even further when we realize that in the Scriptures, Jesus identified Himself as “the door” or “the gate” for the sheep (see John 10). In declaring Himself to be such, our Lord makes it clear that no one can come to the Father except through Him. He alone is the Savior sent by the Father. And there is only one way that opens wide the entrance into this life of communion with God: Jesus, who is the Way.

Now, we’ve all heard the expression before – “opening doors”. It means to give someone new opportunities. For example, going to college can open doors to a potentially satisfying and well-paying career. Something similar can be said of God’s mercy in general and this Jubilee Year of Mercy in particular: that it’s all about **opening doors**.

The word mercy in Latin is ‘misericordia’, which is composed of two smaller words, ‘cor’ and ‘miseri’. ‘Cor’ is the Latin word for “heart”, from which we get our word “coronary”. And ‘miseri’ is the word for “those suffering”. We get our English words “miserable” and “misery” from this word. What this essentially means is that misericordia, or mercy, is us personally experiencing the compassion and the tender pity from the depths of God’s heart that He has for us poor, suffering sinners. But, without repentance, we cannot experience His mercy. In fact, this is where the Sacrament of Reconciliation comes in to play. You may have noticed by now that the past couple of weeks I have been speaking about Confession quite a bit – and intentionally so. In fact, our parish Advent Penance Service will take place this Tuesday evening at 7pm. And I’ve found the finest priests from all across the deanery to hear your confessions – some which you may never see again! Remember, “opening doors” means to be given a new opportunity. And reconciliation is that personal opportunity of the door of God’s mercy being opened unto us in a particular and intimate way – one which we all need regularly.

A few years ago, I was blessed to travel to Argentina, where Pope Francis is originally from. And while I was there, I took the Pope Tour. I learned that in his own life at the age of 16, after going to Confession as a teenage boy back in 1953, he had such a profound personal experience of God's mercy that it changed his heart and convinced him to become a priest. So, imagine if Pope Francis never had that experience of mercy that led him to be a priest, and eventually pope! Similarly, what might we be missing out on by not experiencing God's mercy more often? Pope Francis has even gone so far to say that mercy "is the name of our God"! He (and I include myself here, too) is so convinced that each and every person in the world needs to come before God in repentance in order to truly experience His healing and liberating mercy. This is one of the reasons he's called this jubilee year in the first place!

Ultimately, mercy is an undeserved gift from God that each of us needs to receive time and time again. It's the primary way that God views each of His children. Therefore, let me one more time counsel you, and ask every single person in this church that has already made their First Penance, to make a point of going to Confession, if not during this Advents season, at least during this Year of Mercy. And as Pope Francis has opened the holy doors for the Year of Mercy, so should you open the doors of the Confessional! After all, God's mercy is all about opening doors. God bless you.