

‘Go And Do Likewise’
Homily preached at a Eucharist to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the founding of
the Sisters of Mercy by Catherine McAuley in Dublin, Ireland
St Anne’s Church, Newtown, Wellington, 9 October 2006
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Readings for Monday Week 27: Gal 1:6-12; Luke 10:25-37

A man is robbed, stripped, beaten, and left half-dead at the side of the road. Two men see the victim and pass by on the other side of the road. A third man travelling on the same road is moved with compassion by what he sees.

The first part of the story is similar to this one in a recent *Dominion Post* (hold up page) – a story of men. There are no women at all in either story. What is described is male experience. So it’s difficult for women as women to enter fully into the parable that Jesus told. There are no women we can identify with, they’re just not there. We have to imagine our way into the story to find our place. An Irish woman, Catherine McAuley, did so, in Dublin 175 years ago. That’s our challenge today. It has always been our challenge and will continue to be so – to find our place in the world of men, in a patriarchal world order and in a patriarchal Church – in order to be about the reign of God, to be about God’s mercy and justice.

Pope Benedict said very recently, when asked about the place of women in the Church, that women ‘...will know how to make their own space. And we will have to try and listen to God so as not to stand in their way but, on the contrary, to rejoice when the female element achieves the fully effective place in the Church best suited to her...’ For this Eucharist, then, I have taken my place here, where I stand as preacher of the Word.

Catherine McAuley struggled to find her place in the Irish Church. She wanted to establish a group of lay women who would devote themselves to helping the poor, the sick, the marginalised, the victimised, the powerless of Dublin, in particular women and girls. She didn’t want to become a religious, she had no intention of taking vows. She was about 50 years old and living with fourteen women companions in the House of Mercy she had opened in Baggot St in 1827. It was both a school for poor young girls and a residence for homeless girls and women. By 1829 she was the adoptive mother of nine children as well: five nieces and nephews, two young cousins and two orphans. Eventually the Archbishop of Dublin, Daniel Murray, told her to either stop her charitable work or become a religious. (Perhaps he and his clergy were afraid of a group of women over whom they had no control. Catherine was called an upstart and accused of meddling in the work of the clergy.) So for the sake of the countless poor of Dublin, Catherine chose the latter option. One hundred and seventy-five years ago on 12 December 1831, she founded the Sisters of Mercy, an unenclosed religious congregation of women dedicated to the service of the poor, sick and uneducated.

What did the story of the Good Samaritan mean to Catherine? With whom did she identify? If women today find themselves beaten and on the side of the road, it’s usually

because they have been raped, not robbed. But the parable is not about rape. As women, we can't identify with the priest or the Levite, both representatives of the religious ruling class; we're not part of the clergy, it's not within our experience as yet. We can't identify with the power or authority that comes with being a male. To enter the parable then, we have to use our imagination. I think Catherine McAuley spent the ten years of her religious life doing exactly that. She took up Jesus' challenge to the lawyer at the end of the story to 'Go and do likewise' as she fed, clothed, sheltered, visited, nursed and taught the poor of Ireland. What is the 'likewise' for us today?

When Jesus told the parable, the majority of the men in his original Jewish audience, Galilean peasants, would not have identified with the Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans were long-standing enemies. Some of the audience may have even cheered for the robbers! Perhaps the Temple officials would have admired the behaviour of the priest and Levite. Most men, however, would have immediately identified with the man on the side of the road. That was their place. It was from that place then, that Jesus invited them to see the face of a hated enemy, a Samaritan, as the merciful face of God. How shocked they must have been! If we identify with the man on the side of the road, who is the merciful face of God for us? Who is the Samaritan who crosses the road to minister to us? What is our response?

The priest and the Levite were respected members of the community. The priest had probably been serving in the Temple in Jerusalem and was on his way home. They were both faced with a problem: as Temple personnel they would become ritually unclean if they touched a dead body – and the man at the side of the road may have been dead. So should they stop and help him or should they protect their cultic purity? Both chose the latter and walked past on the opposite side. All three men saw the same sight. Only the Samaritan was moved with compassion. What moves us to compassion today? Or do we suffer from compassion fatigue?

The Samaritan was not a respected member of the community. He was a foreigner, an outsider. No ethnic or kinship obligations required him to respond to the Jew. He didn't have any ritual obligations like the priest and the Levite. That's not the reason he interrupts his travel plans to help someone whom others deliberately go out of their way to avoid. No, we are told that the Samaritan was 'moved with compassion', in the same way that Jesus was 'moved with compassion' for the widow of Nain, and the father of the prodigal son was 'moved with compassion' when he saw his son. It's an overwhelming, gut wrenching, passionate emotion that comes right from the very depths of his being. In the Old Testament it's called God's womb love. I'm sure Catherine McAuley experienced it time and time again.

I wonder what the Samaritan and the Jew talked about, while one was ministering to the other, pouring wine and oil onto his wounds and bandaging them. The story doesn't tell us. Perhaps men don't talk on such occasions. I think women do, but let's imagine that the beaten man was anxious about his wife and family. Perhaps the Samaritan, imagining how worried his own wife and family would be in similar circumstances, assured him that he would let them know that their husband and father was being taken care of. Was

the Samaritan, gently tending to the man's wounds, moved by the strength and courage of the Jew? Was he somehow healed by him? Again we are not told, but Catherine's experience and our own experience as women would suggest that this was so.

Towards the beginning of the story the lawyer, another man in the story, asks, 'Who is my neighbour?' The question seems to be one of boundaries: 'How far must my love extend? Who can I exclude from my love but still keep the law?' If Jesus had asked, 'Who is my neighbour?' at the end of the story, the lawyer would have been able to answer, 'The man who fell among robbers.' But this is not the question Jesus asks. Instead he turns the question round and asks, 'Who acted as neighbour?' The lawyer then rightly answers, 'The one who showed mercy,' a word that Luke uses earlier in his Gospel to describe God's mercy, 'God's womb love'. But just giving the right answer is not enough. Jesus tells the lawyer: 'Go and do likewise'. That is, take as your model the Samaritan, your detested enemy, and show mercy, show God's womb love, without limit.

Catherine McAuley didn't ask the lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbour?' She didn't need to. Her life was spent fulfilling Jesus' command 'Go and do likewise'. Unlike the priest and the Levite she didn't pass by on the other side. What she saw among the poor of Dublin moved her to cross the road time and time again in her efforts to relieve suffering and distress wherever she found it.

So how do we 'Go and do likewise' today? What is our role as Sisters of Mercy in Aotearoa New Zealand? The presence and ministry of approximately 500 women in the Archdiocese since 1861 warranted ten brief sentences, scattered throughout the official history of the Archdiocese published in 2003. But, as Paul reminds us in the first reading, it is God's approval we seek, not human approval. This is our place and this is where we, as Sisters of Mercy, together with all the baptised, must preach as Paul did. We, like Paul are called to proclaim, to witness to, the death and resurrection of Jesus wherever we are. We are called to offer hope in word and in deed as the Samaritan did, as Catherine did.

In his homily during the Mass in Dublin in May to celebrate what we are celebrating this evening, the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Mercy by Catherine McAuley, the present Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, said, 'You are called to re-imagine her vision in our time, to re-evaluate structures and to reconfigure yourselves in light of changing realities. Through being authentic towards her charism, you are called to change and purify the Church in our time.'

So can we continue to cross the road with the Samaritan? With Catherine? In the light of the recent challenges from the Pope, and from the Archbishop of Dublin? Do we need to cross the road differently?

Thirty years ago Dominican priest Matthew Fox described compassion as the world's richest energy source, yet largely unexplored and untapped. Describing the cosmic dimensions of compassion, Fox says that for the sake of the planet's survival we need it more than ever. We haven't even begun to interpret the parable of the Good Samaritan ecologically, thinking about the interdependence of all living things. Most of us just

assume that we will always have other life forms, plants and animals available for our use. We haven't read the parable in the light of climate change. Yet our own bishops urged us last month to live more simply since our world is facing an ecological crisis. Our neighbours, the peoples of the Pacific are already lying on the side on the road, severely affected by rising temperatures and sea levels. Perhaps today all of us are being called to cross the road with an ecological compassion. Perhaps this is what 'likewise' looks like in the South Pacific in 2006.

Catherine McAuley was a woman of wild and daring imaginings. She entered God's timeless 'circle of mercy' 175 years ago. She danced new steps to 'Go and do likewise'. We can do no less.