

The following is a reflection on the Year of Mercy written for the parishioners of St Mary's Ararat by Fr Andrew Hayes and sharing with e-News readers.

The Year of Mercy

"You is kind. You is smart. You is important." Remember that great line from "The Help?" Aibileen would say those words over and over to Eugenia until she believed it, and it would shape the life of the young girl. It strikes me that the order was important. Kindness came first, before potency or power.

Pope Francis would have made a great Hollywood script writer. His papacy has been studded with calls to kindness. "Spreading the Gospel means that we are the first to proclaim and live the reconciliation, forgiveness, peace, unity, and love that the Holy Spirit gives us."

2016 is a Year of Mercy, as proclaimed by Pope Francis. We are called to act with kindness in our hearts, to be people who seek to build up, rather than diminish, one another. The entire Church community is called to do the same. When we cease to be people driven by the kindness or compassion of Christ, are we still a Church?

Loud Fence

The ribbons on our fence might remind us of the years in which we had lost our way, in which lives were diminished, respect for persons diminished, and the command of Christ to be people of compassion had been forgotten.

My mother is quite a woman. She has sewn ribbons onto a stole for me to wear at Mass. She said to me, "Don't tie ribbons on the fence. Be the fence!" The stole is a difficult thing to wear, to put on the sins of priests and brothers who were the holy ones of my childhood. I am a priest because of them and now I visit them in jail to celebrate Mass. People seem to wish it were not so, but Friday night in prison is, truthfully, a beautiful and faith-filled Mass.

Muslims

Parishioners are continuing to "be kind" to the Muslim people in our town. These are faithful, prayerful people of God. The world is, indeed, struggling with terrorism and diverging ideologies. The world is struggling where Judaism, Christianity and Islam intersect. We are struggling at the interface of Eastern poverty and Western affluence. None of this reduces our capacity for kindness or our Christian imperative to show compassion to those who are struggling at the margins of society. We have no upper middle class right to hold our position and refuse to allow others in. "Can they build a new church in Ararat?" "Absolutely!" By what right did some think it reasonable to say "no?"



Praying together in our church on Australia Day was one of the proud and profound moments of my priesthood. We read the story of Moses from the plagues to the Red Sea alternating excerpts from the bible and the Quran, to rapturous applause. The kingdom of God indeed!

We have begun a series of social events to grow together in kindness. Breaking bread together, and even greeting one another, is both a challenge and a joy when there are cultural and religious differences. In this endeavour our parish and Rural Australians for Refugees (Grampians) are enjoying one another's support and encouragement.

People Seeking Asylum

Parishioners continue to attend the meetings of the Rural Australians for Refugees. I am in quiet awe. These are good people who are doing good things. They are teaching us how to be Church. When parishioners rather asylum seekers return to their countries of origin, then come to Mass in supposed holiness, I shake my head. Holiness without kindness is surely empty.

And so our Year of Mercy continues. Lenten Discussions reference the Year of Mercy. We finish the Prayers of Intercession with a prayer for the Year of Mercy.

Listen to Jesus, "he has anointed me ... to set the oppressed free"

Listen to Francis, "the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds"

Now, listen to Aibileen. "You is kind ..."

Fr Andrew Hayes