

The Opening of the Holy Door of Mercy at Aylesford, December 2015

Francis Kemsley, O.Carm.

A few weeks ago I was travelling to York. When I arrived at Kings Cross train station I saw on one of the northbound trains a poster with the words “*Jesus is coming.*” Someone had written underneath “*Providing He changes at Doncaster!*”

This is the season of Advent, which is a time of hope and expectation, waiting for the second coming of the Lord. As we celebrate his first coming as a vulnerable baby in Bethlehem, Pope Francis has chosen to begin the Holy Year of Mercy in this season of Advent. It began on the great feast of the Immaculate Conception. The day was chosen as it was the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of Vatican II. Pope Paul VI, in 1965, at the closing of the Council, mentioned that the image of the Good Samaritan was the model of the spirituality of the Council. Three years earlier, when the Council was opened by Pope John XXIII, he said “*Now the Bride of Christ (the Church) wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity...*”, so it is not surprising that Pope Francis has chosen to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Council with this special Holy Year of Mercy.

The symbol of a door is powerful. Closed doors mean we are not welcome, and an open door conveys that all are welcome. Some of you may remember the little chapel at our former Carmelite retreat centre at Allington Castle. Father Malachy Lynch dedicated it as “*The Open Door*”. It was his hope that the chapel and the retreat centre at Allington would welcome all, regardless of their creed, race, or colour. The Holy Door reminds us that there is a new opening to God’s mercy to every heart. We are all asked to seek and receive God’s mercy, but we are also encouraged to proclaim that mercy to fellow pilgrims.

On the Sunday after the opening of the Year of Mercy, the Third Sunday of Advent, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door of the cathedral of Rome, the Basilica of Saint John Lateran. On the same day the cathedrals around the world, along with the other Shrines of Mercy, opened their Doors of Mercy.

In the Archdiocese of Southwark there are four designated Shrines of Mercy: St. George’s Cathedral, Southwark; here at Aylesford; St. Jude Shrine, Faversham; and Pugin’s Gothic gem at Ramsgate, St. Augustine’s Shrine. Our Holy Door at Aylesford is the one leading to the Confessionals. Father Damian Cassidy, our Prior, designed the banner above the door. Inside there are further banners of the logo and the Jubilee Year prayer. Damian presided at a simple ceremony at the beginning of the 10.15 mass outside the Door of Mercy. After the Door was opened the congregation entered the chapel via the Holy Door for the Sunday Mass.

For Carmelites the role of Mary has special significance. In the Bull of indication of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, "*Misericordiae Vultus*", Pope Francis reflects upon Mary as the Mother of Mercy. The title comes from the *Salve Regina*. In the *Magnificat*, Mary's great hymn of praise, she sings that she receives God's mercy which is "*from age to age*". Later she proclaims that God "*protects Israel, his servant, remembering his mercy, the mercy promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and his line for ever.*" Mary's journey takes her from receiving the message of the angel at Nazareth to the foot of the Cross. There she suffered and became the mother of all believers. Pope Francis writes "*Mary attests that the mercy of the Son of God knows no bounds and extends to everyone, without exception.*" The last time we hear of Mary in the Scriptures is of her waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit with the other family members, the woman who discovered the empty tomb, and the Apostles. She is described in one of the prayers as our pattern of prayer.

The image of Mary as Our Lady of Mercy is of her sheltering and protecting a group of people under her cloak. In the Carmelite missals this is a common depiction, as there are many images of her protecting her Carmelite children under her loving cloak. This too is a reminder that Mary, over the years, is seen in the Carmelite tradition as Protector, Mother, and Sister to the Carmelite family.

Some of our great figures have reflected upon the mercy and love of God such as St. Teresa of Jesus, St. John of the Cross, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and Bl. Titus Brandsma. Perhaps one of the most quoted sayings of St. John of the Cross which has given many much hope and comfort is: "*In the evening of life we will be judged on love alone.*"

When we walk through the Door of Mercy it is suggested we recite the *Our Father*. Vatican II describes the Church, as a Pilgrim People, so it is natural for us to go on pilgrimage. For those who are unable to travel to Rome, we are asked to go to our Cathedral, or another Shrine of Mercy. By taking part in a pilgrimage it is a sign of God's mercy. It is a goal that requires dedication and sacrifice.

The Open Door is a powerful sign that all are welcome who have an open heart to the love and mercy of God. Pope Francis has been seen by some as wishing to decentralise the power of the Church, which is thought to be the original spirit of Vatican II. As there are so many local Doors of Mercy, it is no longer necessary to go to Rome or even to the local cathedral. One observer has suggested that Pope Francis is "*decentralising mercy*". The local church is being encouraged to take the initiative and to open their doors and put mercy into action.

May we all have a good Holy Year of Mercy.