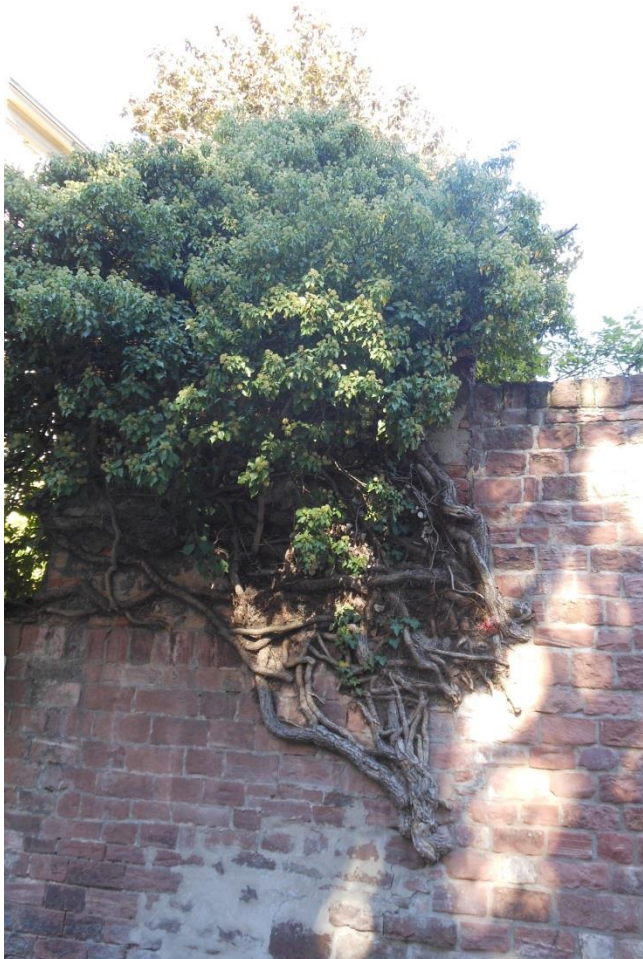


Homily for Year of Mercy Mass at Brentwood Cathedral
Fifth Sunday of Lent - Gospel story of the Adulterous Woman
Mass with special invitation to the LGBT community

Today's Gospel is a beautiful image of mercy, lived. Consider the scene. Those who brought the woman to Jesus are angry - the kind of anger that comes from a mob. They seek justice - and they are quite convinced of what the law has to say about adultery. They have stones in their hands - and to get the fullness of this image we have to think not about pebbles on a beach, but instead picture big slabs, the size of bricks. Stones that are intended to kill.

All of this is pointing towards only one conclusion - death. The particular brilliance of Jesus' intervention, the extraordinary force and grace of this story, is that Jesus, through mercy, turns death to life. He does not contradict the Jewish law, but he encourages everyone to look with eyes of mercy. And it is not just the adulterous woman that lived that day, but the men who came to stone her. Because if they had stoned her, and she had died, then something inside them - some feeling, understanding, compassion would have died too. Without Jesus' merciful intervention, the next stoning would have been that bit easier. With Jesus' intervention, who knows if they didn't pause for thought the next time there was a question of justice. Mercy, dear friends, is life giving, and life changing.



This evening I am mindful that there are people here whose sexuality is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, and people from families with LGBT sons and daughters, grandchildren, friends. You are very welcome here, always, and I hope that in this Mass we all encounter a merciful, life-affirming Jesus Christ; Jesus who names all of us as brothers and sisters, very regularly throughout the Gospels.

On the way into Mass you were given a picture. I love walking, and in recent years I have found it easy and beautiful to spend time in the Black Forest, where hundreds of acres of trees are interspersed with pathways so you can simply be immersed in nature. The picture you have is from Heidelberg, a gem of a town that nestles by the River Neckar. Above the town

is a little road called Philosophenweg - the philosophers' way - because Heidelberg is famous for its University and especially for the philosophy studied there. So a few months ago I was meandering along the Philosophenweg, taking in the stunning views across the river to the castle, contemplating when I might stop for some Black Forest gateau and a glass of the local mineral water, and I came across this quite extraordinary tree literally growing in and within the wall. It totally enraptured me to think that a little seed had somehow embedded itself in the cement, perhaps even as the wall was being constructed, somehow found nutrients to begin to grow, that it had developed this root system and was living within the wall.

It sparked this thought; in our lives, are we sowing seeds or building walls? And it chimes deeply for me with two Gospel verses that you'll see on the back of the card. From the first letter of St John, "Perfect love drives out fear." And from the moment of Jesus' Baptism, adapted because these words are spoken to each of us at the moment of our creation and throughout our lives, "you are my son, my daughter, the beloved. My favour rests on you."

Let me just reaffirm that. To everyone here, every day of your life, with every breath that you take, God names you as beloved. To those who are here from the LGBT community, I pray that you hear those words afresh tonight, and maybe you hear them for the very first time because perhaps no-one has ever quite told you that you are beloved ever since you realised your sexuality.

You see, I have a particular fear. Here in this Cathedral there is a door of mercy. It is open to everyone, freely and all the time. It is life giving, and life affirming, and we all need it. But I fear that so many who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender will not get near the door of mercy because of a wall of prejudice. Dear friends, we have to search our hearts and face a difficult truth: that by some words and actions of our Church, over many decades, we have built walls and closed doors to those who are LGBT. So today let us be very clear, and let me use the words of Pope Francis. "There is no place for homophobia in the Catholic Church," he wrote, when he was Cardinal in Buenos Aires. He should not have had to say it, of course, but it matters very deeply that he did.

If we ever forget that we are brothers and sisters, beloved by God, we have forgotten something essential to our faith. Notice this: the Hebrew word for Spirit is the same as the word for breath. God breathes life into us at the very moment of conception; throughout our life, with every breath we take, we are filled with God's spirit. Each one of us. Whatever our sexual orientation, it matters deeply that we know ourselves and every human person to be gifted and graced. Who we are includes our sexuality, most definitely, and who we are is also our response to the poor, our open heartedness in forgiveness,

our life of prayer and service, our gifts of heart and character, our joy in telling others the Good News. Who we are is a child of God. Each one of us. And we are all beloved. Dear parents and grandparents of LGBT children, you already know that your child is beloved, but if something in their sexuality has caused a rift in the family, has caused a wall to be built or a door to be closed, let this Year of Mercy be a time to open doors. And for those whose sexuality is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, let this Year of Mercy be a time of new beginnings, with family, with friends - and with the Catholic Church. Come through the door of mercy to be welcomed home, with love.

"Perfect love drives out fear." I will never, ever compare adultery to a person's sexuality. Of course not. But I have tonight's Gospel to preach from, and it does strike me that very sadly there is a terrible parallel as there are countries in the world where it could be someone who is gay or lesbian who is in the place of the adulterous woman, being stoned, or beheaded, or beaten, or imprisoned, because of their sexuality. In Britain tonight some teenagers will self harm or contemplate suicide rather than admit homosexuality to family or friends. By any measure that is a tragedy, and our first response must surely be love.

Whatever we think about sexuality, whatever laws teach us, in tonight's Gospel Jesus shows us that the starting point is precisely compassion and love, mercy and dialogue. Whether our stones are words, attitudes or actual stones, the still small voice of Jesus echoes deeply in our hearts: "Let the person without sin cast the first stone." And perhaps chiming alongside that, "Whatever you do to the least of my sisters and brothers, you do to me." Taking up the image in the picture, the tree of mercy has the power to grow through the wall of hatred, or judgement – whether that is a wall put up by some in the Church, or indeed a wall built by those whose sexuality is LGBT and who have come to hate the Church.

The Year of Mercy is an invitation to listen; we will learn most about mercy by listening, really listening, to those who have suffered and are suffering. Refugees, those who have experienced racial prejudice now or in the past, and undoubtedly those from the LGBT community. What could we learn, all of us, by sitting and listening? Did those with stones in their hands take any time to listen to the adulterous woman?

We will learn mercy by listening to those who have suffered. And then we also have something deeply, deeply precious to offer. "Perfect love drives out fear." If we can listen to another who is suffering prejudice and discrimination, for whatever reason, and can respond by telling them 'I hear all that you say - all that you say - and I love you', then we liberate. That is, in fact, the heart of the story of the adulterous woman. The perfect love of Jesus first of all transformed the hearts of those about to stone her - or at least caused them to take a second look at themselves - and then the perfect love of Jesus dispelled her fear.

We are just two weeks away from Easter, and there is one final detail of the picture from Heidelberg that needs attention. Consider what will happen to the tree, and to the wall. It is hard to be prophetic, hard to meet walls of fear and hatred with love, hard to challenge walls of prejudice. Throughout history, and now, every time a new freedom has been discovered and understood, people have died in the process. Throughout history, and now, there are those who – literally and metaphorically – want to build walls. Consider the struggle and pain of those who first planted the seeds of freedom from slavery, freedom of religion, racial and sexual equality, freedom of conscience. When people met Jesus the face to face encounter with perfect love, perfect mercy, did most certainly drive out fear in many - but for others fear of losing power or losing face was too great, they could not see beyond their own walls, and they put him to death on a cross.

There is a story in the picture on the card, a story unfolding as time passes; in some years, perhaps decades, the tree will break down the wall, and - notice this - in that moment the tree itself will also die; it will be torn apart as the wall crumbles. And - like Good Friday - that looks rather bleak and deeply sad. However - and this is not a perfect parallel with Easter, but it is significant - although the wall will be shattered beyond repair, and the tree destroyed, the tree will rise again from the rubble. Why? Because of the seeds it spread throughout its life. Disciples, if you like.

And so we - disciples of the 21st century - leave here with a challenge; the challenge to look again at the law with eyes of mercy, the challenge to meet everyone in the same way as Jesus met the adulterous woman. It is a deep challenge to sow seeds of mercy and understanding, new beginnings and fresh dialogue, a deep challenge to shatter walls of hostility and prejudice. But the door of mercy is an open door. And so we plant seeds of mercy even when it is hard, and we are ridiculed, or much worse - secure in the knowledge that we are beloved by God. We do this as brothers and sisters, who share the same Eucharist. We do this knowing that none of us is so sinless as to be able to cast stones. Ever. And above all we do this trying ever more deeply to live the extraordinary truth that "perfect love drives out fear."