



Homily – John XXIII College

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John XXIII College, Mount Claremont

This year, as you all know, the Catholic Church right around the world is, at the invitation of Pope Francis, celebrating a Year of Mercy. It began last year in fact on December 8 and will finish this year at the end of November. As a Catholic College your school too is a part of this world-wide celebration and I am thrilled to be able to be with you today, as your new school year gets under way, to share with you some thoughts and to put before you some challenges which I hope will help you to make the most of this great gift which Pope Francis has given us.

When the Pope announced this special initiative in a letter last year, he began with a simple statement; *“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy”*. What Pope Francis is really doing is reminding us that at the heart of our faith as Catholics, there stands the person of Jesus. We will never understand our Church, or our faith, or I would say even our lives, if we don’t understand this. And because your school is also part of our Church, I would add that you will never really understand or fully appreciate your own school without this realisation. We can’t really separate our life from our faith in God, or our faith from our Church, or our Church from Christ, or ultimately Christ from God. And as one of the greatest saints of our Church, Saint Augustine, once said, *“We are made by God and our hearts will always be restless until they rest in God”*. In those times, and many of you, both staff and students, will have them this year, when you feel restless or unsatisfied or confused, you might remember these words of Saint Augustine – and try to put the Lord back into your life. He did after all promise us the gift of peace – but we need to let him give it to us: he won’t force it down our throats!

If as Pope Francis says, Jesus is the face of the Father’s mercy, then if we want to know what the mercy of God is like, we need to have a look at Jesus in action. Today’s gospel provides us with a perfect opportunity. It is a story which puts flesh on the bones of the idea that God is merciful. Jesus shows us what mercy looks like in practice.

The two key people to keep an eye on in this story are of course Jesus and Zacchaeus. It is a good idea, though, to remember that there are quite a few other people present as well. A big crowd has gathered to see this famous person, Jesus, who is visiting their town. His reputation will have preceded him and people will be fascinated to see this person who is supposed to be able to work all kinds of miracles. And of course Zacchaeus is one of these curious people. The gospel story tells us that he is a small man. That’s why he climbs up the tree – he can’t see over the taller people standing in his way as Jesus goes past. But I think the gospel writer is also



telling us that Zacchaeus is small in other ways as well. He is small in compassion, small in generosity, small in his ability to appreciate the sufferings and struggles of others, and maybe small in honesty as well. He is a tax collector- he works for the occupying force, the hated Romans, and he collects the Roman taxes from people who perhaps hardly have enough to live on themselves. So he is no doubt despised by the people of the town, isolated and lonely, without friends, and probably becoming angrier and more resentful as each day goes by. And then, on top of all that, he makes a fool of himself by climbing up a tree like a little boy instead of behaving like the grown man he is.

Jesus, who has a remarkable capacity for summing up situations perfectly, comes past and spots Zacchaeus in the tree. And what does he do? Does he tell Zacchaeus to stop behaving like a child and start acting his age? Does he get stuck into him for the way in which he treats, and possibly cheats, his fellow townsfolk? Does he criticise him for collaborating with the hated Romans against his own people? Does he, in other words, criticise or condemn him? No, he simply says to Zacchaeus to climb down quickly because he, Jesus, wants to come to Zacchaeus's home for dinner that night. Can you imagine anything better able to touch, and soften, the heart of a man who is despised, rejected, isolated and angry, than to have someone like Jesus invite himself home for dinner? It must have made Zacchaeus, perhaps for the first time, feel very special. And what's the result? Zacchaeus promises to turn his life around, repay anyone he has cheated and start to live a life of integrity rather than one of dishonesty and shame.

This is what mercy does. It is what mercy looks like. It is generous, and gentle, and forgiving, and encouraging and courageous. It is ready to believe that people can change, that they can be better. It is ready to let go of angry judgments, and a desire for payback and a determination to make people suffer for their mistakes. If I had to sum it up in one word I would say that mercy is about being large-hearted. The story of Jesus and Zacchaeus shows us what mercy looks like in practice and it helps us to understand that this is the way God always deals with us. Our God is a large-hearted God.

I said at the start of this homily that I wanted to offer you all a challenge. Here it is. In this year of mercy can you, the community of John XXIII College, in the day to day realities of school life, be a living example to the rest of us of what a real Catholic school looks like because you are a school where mercy reigns supreme: where generosity and gentleness and forgiveness and encouragement always win out over stinginess, and aggressiveness, and resentment and negativity? Can you be, in other words, a large-hearted school full of large-hearted people? If you can then, just like Jesus himself, you together will also be the face of the Father's mercy. This is the challenge I want to put before you as you set out on this new school year. I will look forward to hearing, as the year goes by, how you are responding to this challenge.