

CLOSING OF THE YEAR OF MERCY
FOR THE RELIGIOUS AT LLANTARNAM ABBEY
ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK
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I hope I don't exaggerate when I say the best musical ever written was "Fiddler on the Roof". It is the story of a small Jewish community struggling to maintain its customs and identity in the turmoil ridden world of pre revolutionary Russia. "Tradition". One of my favourite songs is the blessing at the Sabbath meal before the sun goes down on Friday evening. Two unlit candles are on the table representing the dual commandments to remember and observe the Sabbath. They are lit by the woman of the house who waves her hands over them before covering her eyes so that the light may shine within her. She then sings the blessing:

May the Lord protect and defend you.

May he always watch over you.

May you come to shine in Israel.

May you be like Ruth and like Esther.

May you be deserving of praise.

Strengthen them, O Lord,

And keep them from strangers ways.

Ruth and Esther are two of the many powerful women in the Bible. Ruth, the woman of charity, who refused to leave her mother in law Naomi as a widow in a foreign land. *“Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live I shall live”* (Ruth 1:16). And in today’s Old Testament reading we hear of Queen Esther, one of the wives of the Persian Emperor even though she was a Jew. Intermarriage was one of the burdens the Jews had to live with when yet again they were conquered and taken into slavery in Babylon. *“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and remembered Zion”* (Ps.137:1). *“But how could we sing the songs of Zion on an alien soil”*. Being a stranger in a foreign land, in a court full of intrigue and plots against her husband the king, Esther is vulnerable to all sorts of accusations. And she prays as we heard:

“Remember Lord, reveal yourself in the time of distress. As for me, give me courage, King of gods and master of all power.

Put persuasive words into my mouth when I face the lion. As for ourselves, save us by your hand, and come to my help, for I am alone and have no one but you, Lord”.

Why do I give you that magical mystery tour of the Old Testament? Because in today’s gospel reading from John we have another woman who is vulnerable and unjustly accused, but in the midst of her weakness lies her strength. *“Woman, where are they?”* Where are the men who have accused you? Where are the men who have been partners in your so called adultery? Our God is a just God. The measure of God’s love for us is the measure of our need for

forgiveness. *“Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir”. “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more”.*

That is a wonderful reading on which to reflect at the end of this Year of Mercy. Because that is consistent message of Pope Francis. *“Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more”.* The Year of Mercy has captured the imagination of people, not least because the Holy Father insists on the fact that unless I have experienced mercy myself, unless I realise my need for forgiveness and open myself up to the conversion of life which that forgiveness entails, then I will never be able to show mercy to others. That is the meaning of the Pope’s motto which is a quotation from a sermon of Bede the Venerable, reflecting on the call of Matthew. *“Miserando atque Eligendo”.* Having been shown mercy and having been called.

Another translation says *“Lowly but chosen”.* Those words fitted no one more powerfully than Matthew the tax collector, the Jew who had compromise his own religion, who had exploited his own people by oppressing them on behalf of the Roman conquerors.

Recently, I met another powerful woman, a woman of faith and a woman of courage. Marian Partington is the sister of Lucy Partington, one of the many young woman murdered by Fred and Rosemary West. For twenty years Lucy was missing and no one knew what had happened. And then the garden was dug up at 24 Cromwell Road in Gloucester and a number of bodies were found. In her talk at the Cathedral last week, Marian reflected on *“Can there be mercy for a murderer?”* and described her journey of murderous

hatred and anger against the Wests, through the violence and destructive choices that she had made at times in her life, to a recognition that in that sadistic couple there was such distorted damage in their upbringing and background that self hatred caused them to destroy the beauty and joy which was in the lives of the young women they killed. When she recognised seeds of hatred and wrongdoing in herself, and her need and acceptance of forgiveness for violence in her own life, she has the grace to continue trying to invest the murderers of her sister with the same need for the mercy and healing of God which she herself needed. *“Miserando atque eligendo”*.

Pope Francis tells us that in the Seven Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy we have a perfect framework and legacy of this Year of Mercy. When he says *“I distrust charity that does not hurt”* he is not just talking about giving money to CAFOD. He is talking about solidarity and forgiveness for the sinner. That is each one of us. Feed the hungry. Shelter the homeless. Visit those in prison. Counsel the doubtful. Admonish the sinner. Bear wrongs patiently. Forgive offences willingly. There are more prisons than Home Office establishments. Homelessness is often the lack of a ‘place’ in the midst of a seemingly identifiable social structure. And how to bear wrongs patiently? The woman taken in adultery has a lot to teach us about that. *“Does no one condemn you”*. *“No one, sir,”* she replied. *“Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more”*.