Lent 2016: The Spiritual Works of Mercy & *Laudato si'*

To pray for the living and the dead

Richard Leonard SJ

'The great parable of God's mercy is the best place to start' if we want to think about why praying for the living and the dead is merciful, says Richard Leonard SJ. In the latest article in our series on the Spiritual Works of Mercy in *Laudato si'*, we see how the encyclical calls us to realise that the moments and choices of our everyday lives matter, to us and to God.

The seventh spiritual work of mercy is to pray for the living and the dead. Not long ago Catholics spoke of 'end things' in very dramatic terms: 'fire and brimstone' and the 'physical pangs' of hell. I have always wondered about the literalness of all of this because without the physical body we now have, how could we suffer these physical torments?

Photo by Elvert Barnes at flickr.com

But these images did, in fact they still do, bring home a profound religious truth – that heaven, hell and purgatory exist and that our life here on earth impacts on our eternal life.

I truly believe with confident faith that the Lord will not deny heaven to the many people who faithfully, lovingly and hopefully live their lives as best as they can. The scriptures give us confidence to know that God does not concern himself with small matters. But what about those who do not live their lives in this way? What of those who commit child abuse, physical and emotional violence, serial adultery, and murder, and never repent? What of the individuals, groups and even societies whose behaviour destroys people in other ways, to which Pope Francis makes reference in *Laudato si'*? Those who consume excessively and refuse to share their spoils with those who have nothing in our world?[1] Or those who don't care or don't want to know about the fallout from their apathy or the consequences involved in the luxury of ignorance, those who commit the 'sin of indifference' that Pope Francis would have us pray to avoid?[2]

None of these people, none of us, is ever too far from the compassion and forgiveness of God, which 'knows no bounds'.[3] But I am also convinced that God takes our free decisions on serious matters very seriously:

> For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.[4]

So how do these choices we make and actions we take in this life affect what happens to us in our life with God? Why do we pray for the living *and* the dead?

Firstly we need to think about what a soul might be. I am struck how, in an increasingly secular society, the word 'soul' persists in ordinary conversation. Many non-religious people use this most religious of terms. We often hear that someone who is troubled is a 'lost soul', or that someone kind has a 'beautiful soul'. We say that a piece of music, painting or other work of art 'stirred my soul', and describe mellow jazz as 'soulful'. We even alert others to distress with an SOS call – 'save our souls.' These uses of the word reflect St Thomas Aquinas's teaching that the soul is what sets us apart from other animals, it makes us human. Nearly all of the great religions of the world believe in a soul, or its equivalent – something that survives the annihilation of the body in death.

And I have come to the opinion that whatever else might characterise the soul, memory is an integral part of it. Why?

I have presided at several funerals of people who have suffered from Alzheimer's disease. These are rarely very sad occasions because the family invariably says that they 'lost' their loved one months or years before, when that person ceased to recognise people or remember things. There are now theories about how even the 'memories' of the circumstances of our conception and birth have a bearing on the way we live our lives. This is not to say that even when people seem to have lost their memory that there is not some recognition of some things at a deep level, but what it does suggest is that the instances of our lives, the moments that are encapsulated in our memories, matter – they matter to us, and they matter to God.

> The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves.[5]

That everyone is known completely and remembered by God from conception to death is the foundation of our belief that human dignity must always be respected; it is why we hold to caring for the body from the womb to the tomb. Memory as a constructive element in the soul means that when I meet God face to face, I will remember who I am and how I lived, and so will God remember me.

It's also a comfort for us to think that we will be reunited with those we have loved who have died before us, because we remember one another.

So what happens after our soul leaves our body, 'commended to the mercy of God'? I think the great parable of God's mercy is the best place to start.

In the story of the Prodigal Son we have the worst kid in town making a return and being received by his utterly loving father.

Rather than think of heaven, hell and purgatory as places where we do time, imagine if they are experiences or states. For a goodly number of souls, people who have done their best on earth, when they make the journey home, the Father rushes out to greet them. They start their speech of apology, but the loving Father cuts them off, and welcomes them home. That has to be the experience of heaven – welcomed to the eternal banquet.

Some, however, make the journey home and start the speech, which the loving Father allows them to finish – such has been the enormity of their freely and deliberately chosen destructive behaviour towards others and themselves in this world. At the end of the speech they are forgiven, now fully aware of the gravity of their sinfulness and its impact. It costs us to say 'I'm sorry' and it costs the Father to forgive (like a husband or wife who genuinely forgive the other for adultery), but there is no redemption for us without this repentance.[6] That might be purgatory – an experience in cleansing, of purgation, not in anger or suffering, but in love, painful love as it might be.

And for those who have, if it is possible, deliberately and knowingly rejected God throughout their whole lives – God in all his forms: in faith, hope and love – they make the journey to the Father and come face to face with pure love. They do not start the speech, they are not welcomed in, because God respects their freedom so much that he allows them to do what they have done all their lives – see love and walk away. That has to be hell – to see love, to have glimpsed it and still turn around and walk away because they always do. The ultimate absence: a remembering soul which saw love and chose otherwise.

So praying for the living and the dead is a deeply compassionate thing to do because our free choices have a bearing on our journey in this life and in the final journey home.

> Even now we are journeying towards the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven.[7]

Richard Leonard SJ is the author of Why Bother Praying?

[1] *Laudato si'* §171
[2] *Laudato si'* §246: 'A Christian prayer in union with creation'
[3] *Misericordiae Vultus*, §22
[4] *Laudato si'* §8, quoting Patriarch Bartholomew.
[5] *Laudato si'* §84.
[6] Cf. *Laudato si'* §218.
[7] *Laudato si'* §243.