

Homily – Cheverus High School – Advent Mass- 18 December 2015
Readings: 18 December (Jer 23:5-8; Mt 1:18-24)

Good morning! It is good to be with you. I know that you have been studying hard, and playing hard. Now that I live up the street I see you going and coming to school. I just have to see the morning paper to hear of the success of so many of your sports teams. I am pleased we have such a fine Catholic institution for learning here in Portland.

This is the first time I have been with you since Father George Collins has arrived as your new President. He is a wonderful and dedicated priest who, in the great Jesuit tradition wants you to find the “more”, the “magis” within yourself to profit from the experience of being a part of this school. I appreciate the kindness of the Jesuit superiors in deciding to send us a new priest after Fr. Campbell was transferred. I am grateful, as well, for Fr. Collins’ willingness to accept this assignment. He is known to some of you because he taught here at Cheverus before he was ordained. We are blessed with his presence. He is here, however, for you the students. He does want this to be a place where you are formed for life, in faith, in knowledge, and in a moral way of life. The resources you need for all of that are very much present here. It is a beautiful facility. It has all the learning aids you could want. Technology abounds. You have this great space in the gymnasium and all the other spaces for various sports. You have the spiritual guidance and help you need to set a direction for life. Use these resources well. They are God’s gifts to you.

As I come to you for my annual visit, we are at the beginning of a special year of Jubilee. Pope Francis, whom we had the pleasure of welcoming to the United States in September, has called this year because he thinks our world needs to think about mercy, God’s mercy. The year began on December 8th when the Doors of Mercy in Cathedrals and Churches all over the world beginning at St. Peter’s in Rome were opened. The Doors are symbols for us, the faithful of the Church. They call for

reflection, and conversion, and commitment. A pilgrimage, a passage through the Door of Mercy gives each of us an opportunity to reflect on how I experience God's mercy, and how I see myself called to live it.

To understand better what this year is about we might first start with looking at the word which is at its heart – mercy. The dictionary defines mercy as “a compassionate disposition”. Now I can think of a few examples of mercy in this way: First of all, you are in a game of basketball with your little brother or sister. You could show the young one who is boss but normally we try to be encouraging. You win, but not by 21 points. We call that “mercy” for the young one.

A second example: I saw an article in the paper yesterday that said our weather is going to be very affected by the El Nino. We are probably going to have a drier and warmer winter than normal. As I read that I thought to myself – what about skiing? But then it occurred to me, no snow, no no school days. What a problem! So, I thought I could show mercy to the students at Cheverus and make sure they have one day off during the winter even if there are no snow days. So, do take a day off as Fr. Collins directs. That is an act of mercy, “a compassionate act” as the dictionary defines it.

But Pope Francis wants us to understand something deeper than the dictionary definition of mercy as he calls this special jubilee year. He sees mercy as the way in which we know God. God does not just do merciful acts. He is mercy. The reason that Jesus came among us is to show us God's mercy in human form. Pope Francis tells us that Jesus is “the face of the Father's mercy”. He comes among us in his human nature to bring the message of God's mercy into the world. Jesus reconciled humankind with a God who wants his love to spread in the world. Jesus opened the doors of heaven. The break of sin which occurred in Adam and Eve is overcome in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He came among us to bring mercy. He

showed us mercy. He lived mercy. The mercy he showed us is forgiveness, it is love, it is encouragement, it is compassion.

The mercy that we see in Jesus shows us that the very identity of God our Father is love and mercy. Pope Francis is anxious that we experience God in that way. God cares for us and wants, in Jesus, to show that by walking with us on our journey of life. Jesus is at our side. You may say, “I am unworthy”. ‘Don’t you know, I’m not perfect. I sin. I mess up.’ All the more reason to know that God is mercy. His first act of mercy toward each of us is forgiveness. When we meet Jesus in the Sacrament of reconciliation he forgives us, he shows us the face of the Father’s mercy and he sends us out again to continue life’s journey strengthened by his grace, and supported by his presence in our lives. Knowing that we are not perfect is certainly not a reason to feel ourselves unworthy of God. It is, in fact, the magnet which should draw us to God. Pope Francis encourages us to accept ourselves as we are as he tells us that it takes courage to admit our need for forgiveness. He tells us, “Each of us has burdensome things within ourselves. We are all sinners.” But, for Pope Francis, that is precisely why he wants this year. He wants to bring us closer to the “mercy of God who never tires of forgiving, never tires of waiting for us”.

Pope Francis is convinced that our world needs an appreciation of God’s mercy for us so that we can bring that mercy into the world. In a world filled with fear and violence, and words of disdain for peoples different than ourselves I cannot think of something more needed than mercy, not just a compassionate act, but a compassionate and loving way of life in which people strive to help each other and acknowledge our common creation in God’s love. “Merciful like the Father” is the motto the Holy Father sets for us. He asks us to treat each other in the same way the Father treats us.

Our Gospel today contains a beautiful example of mercy in the life of St. Joseph. The story is familiar. Joseph and Mary are betrothed to each other. In Jewish

law they are united, though not yet married. Joseph has discovered that Mary is pregnant. The Gospel tells us that he decided to do the “just” thing, the righteous thing – he would divorce her quietly. He would not denounce her publicly and shame her. He was perfectly within his rights. And, if he acted in such a righteous manner he would have been a good man. But God has other plans. The child Mary was carrying was not just any child, it was God’s Son. The angel speaks to Joseph in a dream and tells him what is to happen. Joseph accepted what he was told and took Mary his wife into his home. He acted toward her with the very mercy of God.

My friends, to be merciful as the Father is merciful is our call during this year. I know that you do all kinds of good things for others in the course of the year. The other evening, as I was walking across the street to get a pizza I watched all the trucks go by carrying the wreaths to Arlington cemetery to honor those who have given the ultimate sacrifice for their country, and for you and me. I know you helped with this effort which is a real comfort to the families of those who have lost loved ones in the service of their country.

There are many other ways in which we reach out to help others in the course of the year. I hope, during this year, you can see these acts of compassion, not just as things you do, but as ways to grow in appreciation of the mercy of God and his care for you which makes it possible for you to do these things. By so doing you will deepen within yourself an appreciation of God’s love and mercy. You will know that in the companionship you receive from Jesus walking with you in life. And you will want to bring that mercy into a world which so needs it. You will do that by being mercy for the people you encounter in this world we share. You will not just do good things for others. You will care for them with the mercy, the compassion, the love of God.

God bless you all. Merry Christmas!