

Cardinal Luis Tagle

Address to Young People at Flame 2

Our next guest today is a Catholic Cardinal who has travelled right across the world from the Philippines, to be with us all today and share his experience. Please welcome to the stage his Eminence, the Cardinal Archbishop of Manila, Luis Antonio Gokim Tagle.

Hello, hello Wembley, it is good to be here, I would like to thank the organisers of this wonderful encounter of the youth for thinking of me and I bring you warm greetings from the Philippines. It is good to be with young people, with fellow young people. Believe it or not I am a Cardinal, so please believe, and in a special way I would like to greet my brother Bishops and Cardinal Nichols, thank you for taking care of the young people of England and Wales.

I would like to share with you something about the mercy of God and the joy of the Gospel. It will take me a whole semester in the university to exhaust a bit of this theme, but let me try. I have twenty minutes.

First I would like to ask all of you to look around you, not just here but try to recall your homes, your parish communities, marvel at the many signs of mercy. The concrete ways by which men and women show God's mercy to others. At the same time I would like you to open your eyes, open your ears, and open your hearts to the many signs of the lack of mercy. Hunger, thirst, violence, dehumanising poverty, the victims of human trafficking, the abuse of vulnerable people, the children, women, migrants, people with disabilities. Look at the victims and survivors of war. Imagine the incalculable harm done by the lack of mercy to individual persons, to families and to whole communities.

When I encounter someone who has experienced profoundly the lack of mercy from other people or institutions, what hits me is the sense that nobody cares. Nobody cares. When we are touched by those people, who have been wounded by the lack of mercy, then we know that only mercy can save humanity. Our hearts break whenever someone says, 'Nobody cares for me, I am alone, nobody cares.'

It is in this context that we proclaim who God is. The God proclaimed in Exodus 34, 'the Lord the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness', maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet God does not leave the guilty unpunished. God is known as a God of mercy, of tenderness, of compassion. Yet just.

Are you still awake? [Crowd cheers]

Okay, okay I believe you are awake, I think I am talking to myself. Am I still awake?

Now we turn to God's mercy or the God who is mercy and of course we turn to sacred scripture. The mercy of God does not have one neat description in scriptures, so we can talk about it obliquely, but there are so many images depicting the mercy of God. From one perspective the mercy of God is one amazing attachment of God to persons, to God's people, God is attached to human beings

and this attachment is manifested in God's tender compassion, which heals sinners, the wayward and those in need. When we look at scriptures we wonder why is God attached this way, in a tender compassionate way, even to God's enemies. If I were God and I see an enemy, if this person does not change course, I will change course, so that I would avoid doing something violent, but God is not that way. And thank God I am not God. Imagine what would happen to individual persons and to humanity if I were God.

But why is God like that, why is God merciful?

Of course this is a difficult question to answer and I don't know whether we should even ask God that question. But in scripture we realise that the tender compassion of God, this attachment to the persons, the communities that God has created is related to his covenant relationship, 'I am your God, you are my people'. You are mine, how can I give you up?

Due to that covenant relationship, God experiences some sort of an interior duty to be faithful, God even recoils from God's sense of justice, whenever the call of fidelity surfaces. And this makes God's mercy really an experience of generosity, extravagance even on the part of God. Because those that God loves do not deserve that love, the mercy of God is unmerited, it is unexpected. This makes mercy, the mercy of God really a wonderful mystery. And without the mercy of God, no one, no one can survive God's justice. The mercy of God saves us gives us hope, God seems to say how can I destroy you, you are mine and because you came from me, I know there is something good in you and let us work on that good that is in you.

If there are school teachers here, be merciful! Oh I have been teaching since 1977 and I continue teaching up to this day, oh how easy it is to love to remember students who are bright, students who are obedient. But then I realise, these are the student who do not need teachers, because they are already bright. What do we do with those who are quite slow? What do we do with those who we want to kick out of the school? What do we do with those students who we want to give a basking mark to, so that they won't appear next year? Well, God is merciful. God will say yes!

Look at Jesus, he called his twelve students and he taught them for three years and during the final examination, they all failed! They did not understand. They left him alone. Then he rose from the dead and he told Mary of Magdala, 'gather them in galilee'. He will teach them again for forty days and after that he sent the Holy Spirit to continue teaching them. See the mercy of God never ending. God does not give up, the mercy of God.

Now all of these things acquired flesh in Jesus Christ, remember the parables of mercy, in Luke 15, the Gospel reading of today comes from Luke 15. The lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. All of these parables ended in Joy and in feasting. Where there is mercy there is joy. The Gospel is really the Gospel of Mercy.

[Person cheers from the crowd]

[In reply] Hi, thank you for remembering the cue, you know we had a conversation before this, ha!

So the joy of the Gospel is really about the Gospel of joy. What brings joy, true joy, profound joy, the joy that the world cannot give. It is the mercy of God that keeps us whole that gives us hope.

In Matthew chapter 9 verse 13, after the call of Mathew the public sinner there was again a feast. And Jesus said to those who were scandalised, that he was eating with sinners, he said I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come not to call the righteous but sinners. Luke 19 verse 10, visiting the house of Zacchaeus, another public sinner, people started murmuring and Jesus said 'the son of man came to seek and to save what was lost'. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son who has found his way back home, the lost Mathew, the lost Zacchaeus. Why was Jesus wasting his time for these people who were already lost, for only one reason, you are mine. You are mine. This lost sheep might be a liability, financially speaking but it is my own. That lost coin may not amount to anything, but it belongs to me, that son who had squandered everything, he is my son. This is mercy, this is joy, no one is alone, you belong to God. Even when others have forgotten you.

My dear young people of England and Wales, be the living signs in our world of God's mercy. Be living signs of the joy of the Gospel of mercy. Recall in your lives how God has been merciful to you. Proclaim God's mercy and the joy that has come to you, because God has been merciful to you.

I want to share with you openly, a few months ago a former professor of mine who taught us church history, was near death and he called for me, so I visited him. When I entered his room he started crying, he was sobbing and the nurse whispered to me 'whenever former students and friends visit father he becomes emotional'. So I approached him and tried to console him. When he had regained his composure, he looked at me tenderly and said, you know in the Philippines, I am called Chito as my name is Luis, Lusito a small Luis, Chito. I have never grown, I have remained small. And he said Chito, Chito you used to sleep in my class and that's the full truth and the whole truth. And I said, father I am sorry for having caused you this stress and he said no don't worry look at you, you are now a Cardinal, you used to sleep in my class but there is hope for you. So whenever I am tempted to be proud to be self-sufficient, I just recall why am I a Bishop? Why am I a Cardinal? It is only because of the mercy of God and the kindness of other people. Proclaim God's mercy that made you whole, that made you who you are and be God's hands, eyes, ears of mercy. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty welcome those who do not have homes, visit the sick and console those in prison. There is a lot that you could do in terms of mercy and bringing the joy of the Gospel to people. Be Good Samaritans, spread the flame of God's mercy and heal the wounded world.

Let me close, with again some narrative. During the visit of Pope Francis to the Philippines, he went to a shelter for street kids, most of them victims of different types of abuse. I frequent that shelter. In one of my earlier visits a couple, a young man and a young women recently married asked if they could see me, so I allowed them to see me in the shelter. And there they showed me their baby, a

cute little boy, and there I learnt that both of them used to be street kids themselves and they found new life in that shelter. They were able to finish their education, they fell in love. After graduation they got married, now they had a baby and they told me 'Your Eminence, we know the horror of growing up on the streets, we promise you as this shelter took care of us and gave us hope, we will take care of this baby. We will not allow him to experience the pain and sorrow that we had experienced. Mercy begets mercy.

And finally I was reminded of the youth summer camps that we hold regularly in the Philippines, you know there is electricity in the air, and those trying to be young, when they get together. In my first diocese, in one such summer camp, I gave a talk and after the conference, the floor was opened to questions for me to answer. The first question was Bishop will you sing for us, it was totally unrelated to the theme of the gathering because it was a vocation gathering, so I said wait, wait a minute, please ask sensible questions I told them and the questions arrived. Then after five or six questions another girl raised her hand and said oh Bishop will you sing for us? I said you did not tell me that I am supposed to sing, so let me start a popular song and we will sing together, I started with the first line and everyone followed, at the end of the song the young people came to me. Now in good Filipino fashion, they kissed my hand and some of them asked for selfies, we have photo, some asked for autographs on their booklets, their bibles, some even on their shirts, the sleeve of their shirt, and the back of their shirt. There was even one young girl who said Bishop sign here, I said no, no turn around, people might wonder how did that signature get there, oh no, no, no, no. But as this was going on I was getting confused, really confused, I said who am I? What am I? Am I a bishop? Am I a singer? Am I a celebrity? Who am I? Why are they asking for autographs and everything?... The answer came a year later; In a similar camp, one young boy approached me and said bishop you signed my t-shirt last year, I have not washed that shirt. But every night I fold it, I put it under my pillow. I have not seen my father in years, with that shirt I know I belong to a family, the church. I know I have a father.

Dear young people, it doesn't cost much, even a simple signature can be a sign of joyful mercy to the lost and those who feel nobody cares. This is the mercy of God; this is the joy of the Gospel.

To close, I noticed when we were having the opening celebration, the opening ritual, that many of you, probably all of you have your cell phones, your mobile phones. May I please ask you to take it out of your pockets and please send a message to one or two persons, friends. I will dictate to you the message that you will send. Ready?... You might want to send to your parents too. Send this text. 'Blessed are the Merciful!'... We will send them together. Ready? Send! Okay. Thank you very much for your patience and let us ask the Lord to bless us and bless the young people of England and Wales, thank you very much! Thank you!