

Homelessness and our Wisdom Traditions

Inspired by the outcomes of the Mercy International Reflection Process, the new vision statement of Mercy International Association has two foci: **“Standing with the displaced, we will model a world of welcome and inclusion. Actively engaged in the protection of our Common Home, we will witness to the sacredness of all creation.”** Homelessness, with its multi-faceted causes, is a key aspect in the scope of this vision statement. This paper, marking World Homelessness Day on October 10th, seeks to bring homelessness into dialogue with some of our biblical and mercy wisdom traditions.

Jewish Scholar, Abraham Heschel, defines prophecy as “the voice that God has lent to the silent agony of the poor, to the profaned riches of the world” (*The Prophets*, p. 5). Biblical prophets were not so much predictors of the future as those who challenged the oppressive structures and destructive practices of their day. They challenged the communities to change their ways.



In Isaiah 58:6-7, the prophet gives voice to God’s challenge to those who fast to serve their own purposes and who oppress their workers:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

**To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
To let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?**

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

And bring the homeless poor into your house;

When you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

This challenge links homelessness with the results of oppressive and unjust structures and it indicates that the homeless may also be hungry and in need of clothing and relationships. Various needs are interconnected.

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, we read in several places that widows, orphans and strangers, in particular, are to receive justice. **“Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). “Act with justice and righteousness ... And do no wrong or violence to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow ...” (Jeremiah 22:3).** See also Zech 7:10; Deut 10:18; 27:19.

Why were these three groups highlighted so frequently? It is because they were the most vulnerable within the patriarchal structure. Patriarchy is literally 'rule of the father'. The father was the head of the household and had absolute power over his wife/wives, children, slaves, animals, and possessions. Widows do not have husbands and orphans do not have parents. Most significantly within this structure, orphans lack fathers. Strangers are those who come from another land and so they are not part of any households in their new location. None of these is, therefore, directly catered for within the patriarchal system. They 'slip through the cracks', and must rely on the generosity of others.

The above passages from the Hebrew Scriptures constitute a call to justice on behalf of the poorest. They suggest that a community should be judged on how it treats those who are most marginalised. This raises the question of who or what 'slip through the cracks' in our world today. How are we today treating our most marginalised?

Within the Christian Scriptures, Matthew's Gospel is particularly rich in texts that speak to the homelessness theme. After the birth of Jesus, Joseph learns that the tyrant, Herod, is seeking to find and destroy Jesus. Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream to escape with his family to Egypt (Matt 2:13-15).



Rembrandt, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1627.
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Egypt becomes a safe haven for Joseph and his family, just as it was earlier for Jacob's family in a time of famine (Genesis 42-46). Furthermore, **"Out of Egypt I called my son"** (Hosea 11:1) is cited in Matthew 2:15, bringing to mind the Exodus story. Like Moses, Jesus is in danger as a child from a wicked ruler. Intertextually, we learn that Jesus' story will also be about liberation and salvation.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus experience displacement as they flee the dangers in their own land. The ensuing tragic description of Herod killing the young children in the Bethlehem area (Matt 2:16) indicates the horrific extent of those dangers. Upon the death of Herod, Joseph is informed in another dream to return to Israel with his family. Learning that Herod's son, Archelaus, is now ruling Judea, however, Joseph is directed (once again in a dream) to go to Galilee (Matt 2:19-23). [Archelaus was at least as tyrannical as his father. Galilee was now ruled by a different son, Herod Antipas.]

Jesus and his family are thus twice displaced. They are forced to flee from Bethlehem to Egypt and, just when they think it is safe to return, learn of a new danger which causes them to have to leave Judea for Galilee. Their story evokes the stories of so many displaced people in our world today who are moved on to multiple locations in their search for refuge.



In Matthew 8:20, Jesus responds to a scribe who is seeking to follow him: **"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man / the Human One has nowhere to lay his head."** These words describe Jesus' itinerant lifestyle, travelling to various villages, from place to place, as he proclaims the good news. In a contemporary context, this imagery of 'nowhere to call home' is well portrayed by the sculpture, *Homeless Jesus*, by Timothy Schmalz [[click here for a short video-clip about this sculpture](#)].

Jesus' words in Matthew 8:20 presume that animals have homes, for instance, foxes have holes and birds have nests. As we know all too well, in our current situation this is not always the case. Species are becoming extinct at unprecedented rates as habitats are being destroyed. As the MIA vision statement outlines, our commitment to the protection of our common home calls us to witness to the sacredness of all creation.



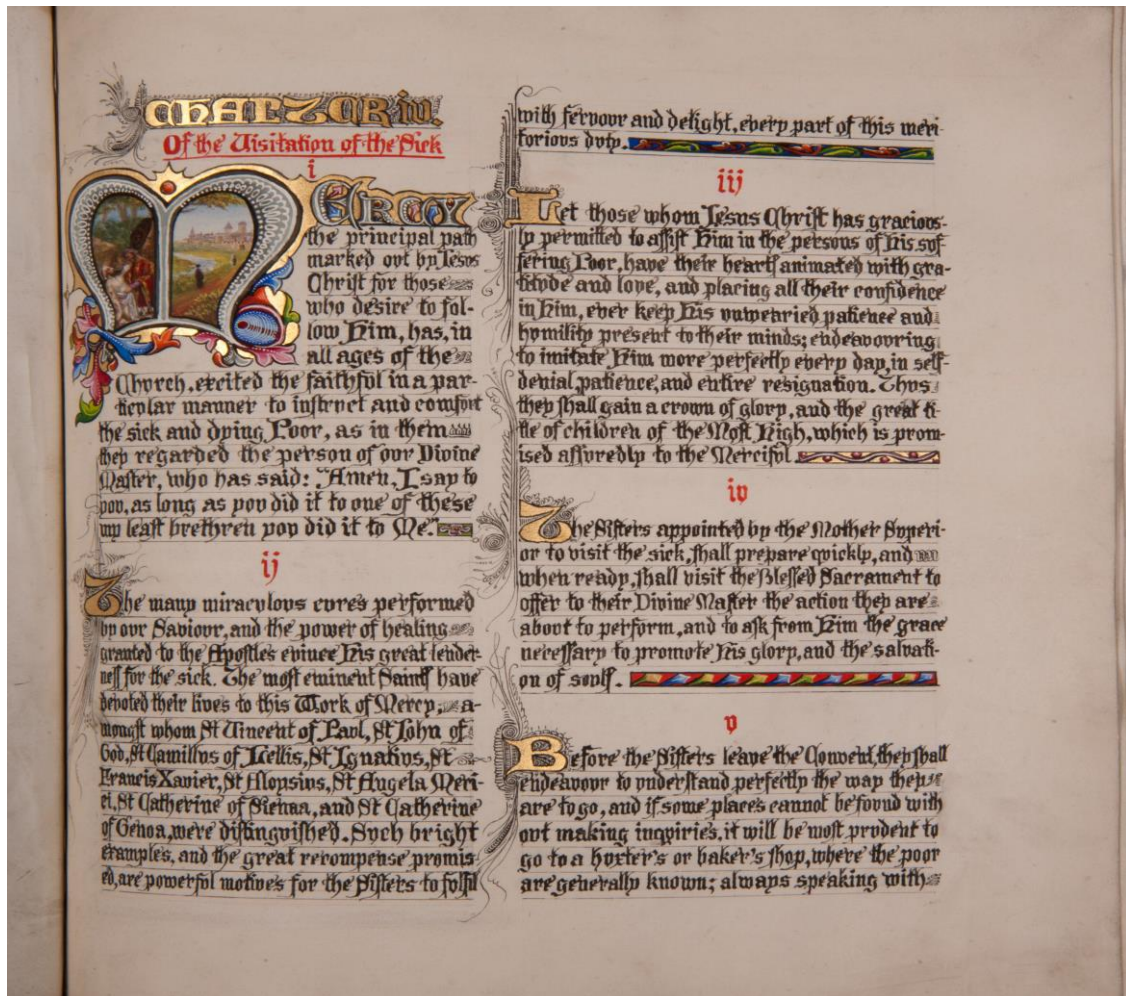
The parable of Matthew 25:31-46 is the final ethical teaching of Jesus before the passion narrative begins. As such, it forms an ethical frame with the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12). While the Beatitudes are the beginning of the first block of teaching by Jesus in this gospel, this parable provides the ending to the last block of teaching.

The key words of the parable are very familiar to us. **"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."** (Matt 25:35-36)

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." (Matt 25:40)

Welcoming the stranger who has no home in a new land is understood as providing for those who are homeless. In this parable of Matthew 25:31-46, we again see that homelessness is linked with multiple other needs. Vulnerability is experienced in various ways. From this parable, the tradition of the **Corporal Works of Mercy** developed: **Feed the hungry; Give drink to the thirsty; Clothe the naked; Shelter the homeless; Visit the sick; Visit the prisoners; Bury the dead.**

We also know that the parable of Matthew 25:31-46 inspired Catherine McAuley. The original rule and constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy was mainly adapted from the Presentation Rule, but two extra chapters were added to cover distinctive works of the Sisters of Mercy. In the first of these, “Of the Visitation of the Sick”, Catherine’s words in the first paragraph surely highlight what is most important to her.



Clare Augustine Moore’s depiction of the Good Samaritan story in *Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy*, Chapter 111 Of the Visitation of the Sick

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The chapter begins with the words: “Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him”. For Catherine, Mercy is about following Jesus, doing as Jesus did. The last words of that paragraph come from the parable of Matthew 25:31-46. “Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren [sisters and brothers] you did it to Me.” For Catherine, following Jesus entails living the corporal works of mercy depicted in the parable. Clare Agnew’s sketches of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy illustrate the early sisters engaged in all these activities. [For more information on the context of these drawings, see the recent MIA publication, *A Lens on the Works of Mercy: Clare Agnew and her Legacy* by Annette Schneider rsm].



I was a stranger and you took me in.

Clare Agnew's drawings of Sisters of Mercy engaged in the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy.
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In his Message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation on 1st September 2016, Pope Francis declared a new work of mercy: Care for our Common Home: "As a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires 'simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness' and 'makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world' (*Laudato Si'*, 230-31)."

Both the biblical and Mercy traditions understand homelessness to be linked with a range of other needs. They understand that homelessness is not an isolated issue. These traditions call us to work for justice for our most vulnerable, breaking "the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness", as Francis says, so that all can flourish. World Homelessness Day on October 10th is a challenge for us to consider how we are continuing to live the works of mercy in our contemporary world and how we are treating the most vulnerable in our Earth community.

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