



# Doing Works of Mercy

KATHLEEN RUSHTON discusses mercy in Matthew 25:31-46.

**M**atthew 25:31-46 reminds me of when in 2011 I stood gazing at the six relief panels on the façade of the 17th-century Seven Works of Mercy House in Ghent, Belgium. The seventh work is missing – this is because it is to be lived out in that home. Now I ponder how we are living the works of mercy in Earth during this time of pandemic.

We can think of specific initiatives: hospitals for the sick, soup kitchens for the hungry, shelters for the homeless. But as Pope Francis says if we “look at the works of mercy as a whole, we see that the object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces.”

## Into the Chaos of Another

Moral theologian James Keenan writes of mercy as “the willingness to enter into the chaos of another.” This means entering into the entire “problem” or “chaos” of a particular

situation – my own chaos, the chaos of our world, the chaos of evolutionary processes.

Matthew 25:31–46 gives the only description of the Last Judgement in the New Testament. The sole criterion is good works. In the biblical cultural context, “good works” and “evil works” had precise meanings. Good works were actions of mercy on behalf of those in need of them and works of peacemaking that eliminated discord. We see this meaning also in the Old Testament such as in Isaiah 58:6–7 and Micah 6:8 and elsewhere in the New Testament such as Mt 5:38–48; 1 Timothy 5:10, 25; 6:18.

Earliest Christianity spread during a time of social chaos and chronic misery in the densely populated cities of the Roman Empire. Short life expectancy meant there was a constant stream of newcomers to the cities – strangers who were well treated by Christians there. Christians gathered in the homes of wealthy members and witnessed to the belief that they could not love God unless they loved one another. This was revolutionary behaviour because for the Romans mercy implied “unearned help or relief”

which clashed with their sense of justice. The works of mercy in Matthew 25:35-38 describe seeing to the basic needs of the majority poor. What is new is that the community identifies the poor with Jesus the Christ.

When we reflect on the basic needs of the poor today we can see the ongoing need for mercy.

## Feed the Hungry

We know that in our world we produce enough food to feed everyone – but millions are hungry and have neither growing land nor money for food. Climate change is affecting food security. And the nutritional status of the most vulnerable population groups is likely to deteriorate further due to the ongoing health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. We can help relieve this by learning about the issues surrounding hunger – globally and locally. And we can directly assist – and show mercy – by, for example, checking that the shelves at our local Vincent de Paul or mission food bank are adequately stocked.

## Give Drink to the Thirsty

Access to clean water is a human

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right — yet many do not have safe drinking water. Rather than seeing water as belonging in common to all, there are global moves to privatise and commodify water. Water is interconnected in the ecosystem and the pollutants we pour on the ground end up in our water as do the pollutants we spew into the sky. These are “invisible ways” we participate in the pollution of this primary necessity in Earth.

We can show our appreciation of water by not wasting it. We can be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters requesting their human right to clean water. And we can also find out about water management in our area.

### Welcome the Stranger

The United Nations Refugee Agency tells us that there are at least 79.5 million people around the world who have been forced to flee their homes. These people are stateless and lack access to basic needs such as adequate housing, education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. The problem has grown so large that some refugee families are waiting generations before they are invited to another country.

We can reflect on how we could respond to Jesus’s statement: “I was a stranger and you *entertained* me [that is, received me as a guest].” Maybe it’s by supporting local shelters for the homeless or those escaping domestic violence.

### Clothe the Naked

Millions of poor families have inadequate clothing for their situations. In contrast, the fashion industry supplies our shops with cheap, throwaway garments, most of them manufactured in poorer countries, in poor working conditions and where the workers have poor wages. There can be slavery in some areas of the production chains of these goods. As well as becoming informed about the ethical origins of clothing, we can limit our buying and recycle, repurpose and repair more. We might also consider volunteering at a Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army or Hospice shop.

### Visit the Sick

We know how human behaviours have affected the well-being of Earth’s ecosystems and Earth’s capacity to support life. As well as living more carefully by learning from this destruction we may be able to join community groups in such activities as clean-ups, planting and replanting, protecting species and waterways.

And we can be more present to one another. In this COVID world, we may not be able to visit and touch the sick as we once could, but we can give signs of acknowledgement and empathy. We can become more informed and understanding of those with physical and mental illness and ensure they do not fall out of the mainstream of life. We can learn to listen, converse and pray with people who are sick or lonely.

### Visit the Prisoners

“I was in prison and you came to me” (literal translation). Prison reformers claim that the number of those in our prisons is too high and in many cases the time spent in prison does not prepare the person to move back into the community meaningfully. We could be interested in learning more about the areas of reform in our prisons, the gains made and what still needs to be done. And we might be able to support the ventures that help those who have come out of prison to integrate into the community again — to find work, housing and to

reconnect with their families.

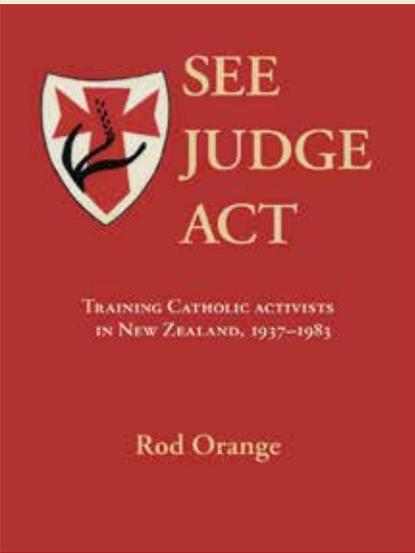
We could learn about and advocate for prisoner access to personal development programmes, eg, education and restorative justice programmes. Faith can help transform our lives and for some prisoners the ministry of prison chaplains helps deepen their faith and confidence. How can we support this ministry? And we might reflect on whether a person recently released from prison would feel welcome and at home in our parish.

Some people risk imprisonment by standing up for justice against governments or corporations. We can think of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi at Parihaka during colonisation, Aung San Suu Kyi in home detention, Greenpeace protestors in the Pacific and many more. We might feel drawn to finding out more about the power of advocacy campaigns.

One or other of these suggestions may inspire us to live the works of mercy more intentionally. As Mother Teresa said we can practise them in our neighbourhoods: “Stay where you are. Find your own Calcutta. ... there where you are.” ❤️

22 November Mt 25:31-46  
RL — Feast of Christ the King  
RCL — 25th Sunday After Pentecost, Reign of Christ

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