

Abrahamic Celebration of the Year of Mercy
An Abrahamic panel on Mercy in our Sacred Scriptures
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Venue: Pearce Room, St Joseph's Church, Mt Victoria

Mercy: The Beating Heart of the Bible
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My poor feijoa tree! When I looked at its miserable crop recently – 12 feijoas in total – I decided that once I had picked the fruit I would enlist my brother's help to dig the tree out and throw it away. My patience with it over the past couple of years had run out. Once again it had flowered magnificently at Christmas time and the signs were all there for a bumper harvest but its promises amounted to nothing. What a waste of space in my crowded Newtown backyard! 'Enough is enough!' I thought. Fortunately however, I was reminded of the parable, unique to Luke (13:6-9), about a fig tree soon to be pulled out because it had been unproductive for three years. The gardener complained, suggesting to the owner to be more patient. He wanted another year to look after the tree and fertilise it. Even an unproductive one deserves another chance. So in a couple of weeks' time my feijoa tree will be pruned, re-potted and fertilised – not destroyed. Watch this space as they say! The point of the parable is, of course, that God's mercy is never exhausted. There's always another chance. As Pope Francis said announcing the Jubilee Year of Mercy, 'No one can be excluded from the mercy of God.' And in his wonderful document of proclamation, *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Pope begins by saying that Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. So mercy is basically a description of God's nature, God's central attribute. God cannot be other than merciful. Everything in Jesus' life speaks of this mercy. All his actions and words witness to, reflect what mercy is. And Jesus says to us, 'Be merciful as God is merciful.' So we have to imitate God's mercy. As Ronald Witherup explains so simply, Like father, like son, like disciple.

Pope Francis says that the mercy of God is the beating heart of the Gospel (MV12). I would like to suggest that it's the beating heart of the entire Bible. Our hearts too must echo that beating, that pulsing of mercy. We have to develop a rhythm of mercy – a continuous habit that is as natural and as regular as our own heartbeat. We're usually unaware of our heartbeat but if we take our pulse we can feel it. If it should stop then we could be in big trouble.

Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in 1831, lived such a rhythm of mercy. She said:

Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular

manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our Divine Master, who has said, Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me.

So Jesus must be the beginning, middle and end of all our endeavours as we strive to do mercy for 'the lost, the last and the least' here in Wellington — Bishop Justin Duckworth's phrase.

Pope Francis in his Lenten Message, 'The Works of Mercy on the Road of the Jubilee', urges us to practise what the Church's tradition calls the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. These works are not just pious feelings. They are concrete actions – we'll get messy, we'll get our hands dirty but these works will keep our heart beating with mercy. So mercy is a verb, an action, mercy is something we do.

In this presentation I will first outline a key understanding of mercy from the First Testament; second look at the biblical underpinnings of the works of mercy; and third give a New Testament perspective on mercy.

When we turn to the First Testament, God's mercy, not God's wrath, is writ large throughout. Basically there are four Hebrew words which in English, translate as mercy (with various nuances): *rahamîm*, *hesed*, *hanan*, and *hus*. This presentation will refer mainly to the first term.

The root word *rhm* (to show mercy) refers to the tender love of parents towards children and of God toward humans. Generally the noun *rahamîm* (mercy, compassion, love) denotes a quality of God. It is the completely gratuitous, unconditional, merciful love that we cannot explain rationally. The word *rehem* (womb), comes from *rhm*. Thus, the adjective *rahûm* (compassionate, merciful) describes womb love, the kind of attachment a woman has for a child. It is only ever used of God. So the prophet Isaiah says:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you (Isa 49:15).

Throughout the First Testament we see the God who creates, saves and judges but underlying all God's activity is a God who is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exod 34:6). The first two adjectives – merciful and gracious – never describe people but they describe God in a great variety of settings. For example, the entire formula is found in individual petitions for deliverance and as motivation for national and divine repentance:

Rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing. (Joel 2:13)

Scripture scholars constantly remind us, that all biblical language about God is metaphorical. The description of God as ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger rich in steadfast love and faithfulness’ is considered to be a controlling metaphor since this fundamental character informs all of God’s actions throughout the First Testament. We first find this moving proclamation in the Book of Exodus (34:6-8):

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,
‘The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation.’
And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped.

This key text is located in a section (Exod 32-34) which describes how the Israelites under Aaron sinned against God by making a golden calf, how God punished their infidelity by sending a plague, how God forgave them, and how Moses acted as mediator in the restoration of the covenant. The theophany or experience of God which the passage describes is not so much a description of physical attributes as one of divine characteristics (merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness). And because God is merciful God spreads out the punishment over three or four generations. Even though Moses doesn’t ask for God’s name as he did earlier when he had the burning bush experience (Exod 3:13-15), God gives it anyway! God’s name ‘Lord,’ is a revelation of God’s essential being, God’s essence and is clearly identified with God’s mercy and graciousness. This identification suggests that mercy is constitutive of the very nature of God. This passage (Exod 34:6-8) supplies the language Israel will use to speak to God and to speak about God. The rich array of terms – merciful, gracious slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and forgiving, becomes Israel’s most characteristic or typical speech about God. This language will be used repeatedly to describe God both in hymns of praise about God (e.g., Ps 111:4-9):

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.

and in prayers of complaint to God (e.g., Ps 86:14-15):

O God, the insolent rise up against me;
a band of ruffians seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them.
But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Verse 15 appears in different versions in different contexts with different functions throughout the First Testament. It is speech to which Israel turns repeatedly in moments of crisis.

As well as the golden calf episode, two other crises evoke God's mercy and everlasting love: the collapse of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE characterised in terms of a marriage and divorce metaphor (Hos 2:2-23); and the Babylonian Exile in 587 BCE characterised again by divorce imagery (Isa 54). The divine oracle in response to each crisis (Hos 2:19-20; Isa 54:7-10), the speech that resolves each crisis uses the same language as the first oracle: *rhm* (mercy) and *hesed* (everlasting love).

The moving proclamation becomes a creedal recital throughout the First Testament, e.g., Ps 103:8; 145:8; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Joel 2:13. And Jonah, the reluctant prophet, must have really had the phrase drummed into him. He tries to flee from God precisely because, as he says, 'I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (Jonah 4:2)! Jonah was devastated to learn that the dreaded Ninevites had experienced this merciful God. To Jonah's way of thinking, surely such a God belonged only to Israel!

Thus Exodus 36:6-8 is a key text in helping to articulate the very character of God throughout the First Testament. It is deeply entrenched in Israel's memory and used time and time again in different circumstances. This merciful God is the God who over and over again gives people another chance. Although the word 'merciful' is not found in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, God's mercy is writ large there

too: God makes clothes for the first couple to protect them after their expulsion from the garden; God marks Cain the murderer for his own protection; God makes a new beginning with Noah after the flood. But again the people forget who they are and alienate themselves from one another and from God. Yet the God of mercy never abandons them, instead gives them another new beginning by calling Abraham and Sarah. This merciful God, the God who over and over again gives people another chance is captured beautifully in Deuteronomy:

Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them. (4:31)

And in the Book of Wisdom:

But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things,
and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent. (11:23)

The prophet Hosea provides a moving portrait of a distraught, almost heart-broken but fiercely determined God:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. (Hos 11:8-9)

The First Testament for Christians ends with Malachi's promise that God would send the prophet Elijah (4:5). Thus God's mercy has not ended.

It is in the First Testament, too, that we find the biblical underpinnings of the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, giving drink to the thirsty and burying the dead. ('Corporal' means 'of or belonging to the body'.) The corporal works of mercy then refer to acts of mercy that relate to physical needs.

The prophet Zechariah repeats a message found throughout the First Testament:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (7:9-10)

The author of Sirach writing to encourage Jews to maintain their traditions in an increasingly Hellenistic world (4:1-5) advises:

My child, do not cheat the poor of their living,
and do not keep needy eyes waiting.
Do not grieve the hungry,
or anger one in need.
Do not add to the troubles of the desperate,
or delay giving to the needy.
Do not reject a suppliant in distress,
or turn your face away from the poor.
Do not avert your eye from the needy,
and give no one reason to curse you.

Some of the traditional works of mercy are found in the prophet Isaiah:

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? (58: 6-7)

In this passage then we find three: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked. We find the other works practised by various people. Perhaps they had developed a mercy beat, a mercy rhythm to their daily lives? In the Book of Genesis we find Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel giving drink to the thirsty Isaac at the well outside the city of Aramnaharim (Gen 24:18). In the days of the divided monarchy King Ahaziah of Judah visits the sick King Joram of Israel who is recovering from battle wounds (2 Kings 8:29). And we can find an example of visiting the imprisoned. The second time the prophet Jeremiah is imprisoned he is thrown into a muddy cistern (Jer 38:6). Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian servant, successfully pleads with King Zedekiah of Judah for Jeremiah's release. He visits him and throws some old clothes and rags down into the cistern for Jeremiah to put between his armpits and the ropes and pulls him out of his prison. The seventh work of mercy, burying the dead is found at the end of First Book of Samuel. The inhabitants of Jabish-gilead bury Saul and his three sons under a Tamarisk tree after they are defeated by the

Philistines on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31:11ff). Burying the dead is also found in the Book of Tobit together with feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Finally we have the beautiful account in Genesis of a weeping Abraham, a stranger in a foreign land trying to buy land from the Ephron the Hittite to bury his wife Sarah. Abraham is unwilling to accept the field of Machpelah with a cave and trees as a gift from the people of the land and insists on buying it for 400 shekels of silver (Gen 23).

We find six of these corporal works of mercy in the well-known Parable of the Sheep and Goats towards the end of the Gospel of Matthew. The king says:

for 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.’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (Matt 25:35-36, 40)

Pope Francis, like Catherine McAuley before him in 1833, reminds us that these are the criteria upon which we will ultimately be judged.

The spiritual works of mercy are less well known. We are urged to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead. Such practices will foster our mercy rhythm of life. Again we find their underpinnings in the First Testament. The prophet Isaiah tries to counsel King Ahaz of Judah to remain firm in faith. The king is under intense pressure to join a coalition against the dreaded enemy, Assyria (Isa 7:1-9). The faithful King Jehoshaphat instructs the ignorant in all the cities of Judah (2 Chron 17:7) about the meaning of God’s law. Brave Samuel admonishes Saul for failing to obey God (1 Sam 15ff). The prophet Jeremiah comforts a sorrowful and exhausted Baruch, his friend and secretary, with a message of hope (Jer 45:1ff). Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers and forgives them for trying to kill him (Gen 45:1-5). David bears wrongs patiently when Shimei, son of Gera, repeatedly curses and throws stones at him for trying to take back the throne usurped by his son Absalom (2 Sam 16:5-14). Finally we see Abraham praying for the living and dead of Sodom (Gen 18:22-33).

By this stage some of you will be saying, “Elizabeth, what about the women of the First Testament? Surely they were engaged in works of mercy? Apart from Rebecca you have mentioned only men!”

Well! Who can forget those remarkable women who played such a crucial role in Moses’ very survival (Exod 2:1-10)? It was the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, Moses’ mother, Jochebed, his sister Miriam, and the daughter of Pharaoh who sheltered,

clothed and fed him and admonished those trying to kill him. Without their works of mercy Moses would not have survived. It was Huldah, the prophet from whom Hilkiah the high priest sought counsel to verify the Book of the Law found in cleaning up the Temple (2 Kings 22:13-16). It was Deborah, the prophet and judge to whom people would come for advice (Judges 4:4-5). It was Tamar who admonished Judah, her father-in-law for failing in his duty (Gen 38). It was Judith who chided the rulers, for putting conditions on God. She reminded them of God's actions in the past and exhorted them to trust in God. (Judith 8:11-13). These are but a few examples of explicit works of mercy. Many more implicit ones could be found. For example, I am sure there would have been much 'comforting of the sorrowful' by and among Naomi, Ruth and Orpah in the Book of Ruth on the deaths of their husbands and sons.

And if we jump forward at this point to the New Testament we meet the Samaritan woman from whom Jesus asks for a drink (John 4:7) and the feisty Canaanite woman who admonishes Jesus (Matt 15:21-28). Finally we have the story of the Tabitha in the Acts of the Apostles (9:36-43). The only New Testament woman called a disciple she is remembered for works of mercy – she makes clothes for the widows of Joppa. (Her ministry must have been respected by the whole community not just the widows because at her death two men are sent to get Peter.)

(In this morning's Dominion Post there is a very moving account of burying the dead. Duncan Garner describes the email he received from Chelsea Tautala, a funeral director, who cared for baby Moko Rangitoheriri after his care-givers' brutal beating and torture. She collected his body from the hospital and assured Duncan that from that moment he was never left alone.)

Tomorrow many of you will be engaged in the corporal works of mercy and perhaps some of the spiritual ones too. With the current ecological crisis we have to ask what does it mean to do these works of mercy in the light of care for our earth? The prophet Hosea writing in the 8th century BCE paints a horrifying picture of environmental degradation resulting from human behaviour which could very well describe our current situation:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals

and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing. (4:1-3)

Perhaps the land, the animals, the birds and the fish are part of 'the lost, the last and the least' today, asking for mercy from us. Throughout *Laudato si'* Pope Francis challenges us to broaden our horizons to include the natural world, our common home.

(Recalling here my feijoa tree, some of you will have noticed that I was discussing the tree purely in terms of what it could produce for me rather than recognising its intrinsic value as a tree. Perhaps it is trying to tell me that it is too cramped in its current pot, that it is hungry and thirsty, and that it would really like a feijoa friend close by. I need to be merciful to my tree.)

Throughout the First Testament then, mercy is a very rich concept indeed. It is closely associated with womb love, compassion, loving kindness, faithfulness, tenderness, grace, favour, steadfastness, forgiveness, loyalty and pity. While it is a divine attribute or quality, those receiving God's free gift must in turn be merciful to others especially to those most in need, 'the lost, the last and the least' in all of God's creation.

New Testament

For Christians the clearest model of mercy is, of course, Jesus. His actions often speak louder than his words because he expresses mercy in specific, concrete actions. We see him eating with sinners and prostitutes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming all manner of outcasts, teaching his sometimes obtuse disciples, and patiently answering questions. Jesus' mercy is remarkable for its inclusiveness. He heals and comforts all-comers without distinction, Jews and Gentiles. Of the ten lepers who cry out, 'Jesus Master have pity on us, the one who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan, an outsider (Luke 17:16). In the Gospel of Matthew it is a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:22), a social and religious outsider, who calls out to Jesus as Son of David for mercy. Similarly, Jesus tells his listeners that the tax collector, who prays, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' went home justified (Luke 18:13-14). Thus Jesus' personalises his mercy. It's never generalised but clearly demonstrated in his daily encounters with specific individuals and groups across society.

As poet James K Baxter puts it:
'Truth' - he said, and - 'Love' - he said,
But his purest word was - 'Mercy' -

Two words in particular are used in the New Testament to denote mercy or compassion: *eleos* (mercy) and forms of the verb *oiktiro* (to be sympathetic). These words describe the compassion of God, as well as the compassion that Christians

should have for one another. Thus Jesus says 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36). Neither *eleos* nor *oiktiro* is ever used with reference to Jesus. The word that the New Testament writers use to describe the compassion of Jesus is *splanchnon*. Originally it referred to the lower part of the body, especially the womb or the loins. Later it came to refer to profound feelings or emotions. Except for its use in three parables, when it is used as a verb it is only ever used of Jesus. Thus Jesus is moved with compassion (we might say 'gutted') at the plight of the blind men (Matt 20:34), the leper (Mark 1:41), the boy with the demon (Mark 9:22) and the harassed and helpless crowds (Matt 9:36; 14:14). Out of compassion Jesus multiplies loaves and fishes (Matt 15:32) and raises the widow's son from the dead without her even asking (Luke 7:13).

The verb form of *splanchnon* is used in the well-known parables of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:27). In the first parable God is characterised as compassionate. The second parable provides a model of how Christians should treat one another while the third parable refers to both God and Christians (18:33). The Samaritan 'sees' and is 'moved with compassion' in the same way as Jesus 'sees' and is 'moved with compassion' for the widow of Nain (Luke 7:13). It's an overwhelming, gut wrenching, passionate emotion that comes right from the very depths of his being. Compassion (*splanchnon*) then is a divine quality that, when present in human beings such as the Samaritan, the hated enemy enables them to feel deeply the suffering of another and furthermore, to do something about it. It never remains just at the feeling level – there is always action. However, as Veronica Lawson points out, 'The present ecological crisis calls us to new ways of being neighbour...' (*The Blessing of Mercy*, p.72.)

The word most often used in the New Testament for compassion or mercy is *eleos* indicating emotion aroused at the undeserved suffering of others. When this word refers to God it signifies steadfast love or covenantal fidelity. For example, Mary in her *Magnificat* praises God whose 'mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation' (Luke 1:50, 54). Similarly Zechariah's *Benedictus* praises God who 'has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant' (Luke 1:72). Later in this canticle God's mercy is described as 'tender' (1:28). The Church uses these two beautiful hymns in its evening and morning prayer respectively. Ronald Witherup describes them as bookends of mercy consecrating each day in remembrance of God's merciful actions. *Eleos* is also used to describe God's attitude to sinners and implies new life or rebirth (e.g., Eph 2:4; Titus 3:5). The author of the First Letter to Peter puts it this way:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Pet 1:3)

Those who were sick begged Jesus for *eleos*. The early Christians included the word in some of their formulas for greeting and blessing (Gal 6:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2).

In Luke's three memorable parables of a lost sheep, coin and son (15:1-32), Jesus shows us a God with a 'lost and found' department. With reference to these parables, the NZ bishops remind us in their recent pastoral letter, 'Be Merciful' that indeed nothing in creation is to be excluded from God's mercy: animal, mineral, or human.

Mercy is not a private matter. We need to tell others about the mercy we have experienced. After freeing the demoniac Jesus entrusts him with a mission: 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you. (Mark 5:19). The Lectionary will remind us on Friday that 'the Lord is compassionate and merciful' (James 5:11).

Jesus' command 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36) is basic to an understanding of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Likewise the beatitude 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy (Matt 5:7) clearly connects the receiving of mercy with being merciful to others. Jesus wants works of mercy rather than piety (Matt 9:13; 12:7). We see this most clearly in the parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:21-46).

Paul's letters provide us with a wonderful portrait of a man utterly and passionately convinced of God's mercy in his own life. This mercy came through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From the moment of his call described like a First Testament's prophet's call in Galatians (1:15-16), Paul is alive with God's mercy. He describes how God's mercy sustains him and his co-workers in their ministry (2 Cor 4:1), how inclusive God's mercy is (Rom 10:12), and how we must be ambassadors/agents of God's mercy (2 Cor 5:18-19). He urges us to do works of mercy with cheerfulness (Rom 12:8). He explains to Timothy that because he has received God's mercy for his past persecution of Christians he can be an example for others (1 Tim 1:13-16). If he can receive mercy for his former deeds then anyone can. Paul acknowledges that it is God's mercy that saves us, not something that we do (Titus 3:5).

Finally, Paul's understanding of God's gift of mercy and our responsibility to be merciful is beautifully captured here:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. (2 Cor 1:3-4)

As we have seen then, God's mercy is writ large through the whole Bible. Indeed it is the beating heart of the Bible. As the psalmist prays:

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.(Ps 25:6),

may that be our prayer too. And may 'Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him... excite' (CMcAuley) i.e., inspire you, call forth mercy in you tomorrow, as you respond to the needs of 'the lost, the last and the least' (JDuckworth) here in Wellington.

Let the beat go on!

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