

Workshop Notes 'Be Signs of God's Merciful Love'



SLIDE ONE – HOLDING SLIDE

LEADER'S NOTES

This presentation lasts up to 20 minutes. **We recommend you deliver the whole assembly but feel free to use the slides and script as time and circumstances allow.**

To reduce time, omit extension tasks.

This assembly covers the following themes: mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.



SLIDE TWO

In today's workshop, we are going to think about mercy and to begin, I'd like you to consider the words on screen, spoken by Pope Francis to a gathering of young people:

'God wants you to be signs of his merciful love for our time!'

What do you think of the Holy Father's words? Raise your hands if you like them?

- What do you think they mean?
- What must we show to become 'signs of merciful love?'

A good place to start is by understanding what the word 'mercy' means.

- Can anybody provide a definition of mercy?

[Click to reveal](#)

Being kind, compassionate, and forgiving; most notably towards those who have caused offence. A willingness to help anyone in need.

Being merciful to others is hugely important to Pope Francis because it was hugely important to Jesus and was a key message in his ministry.



Jesus – who, as Christians, we believe is God-made-man – spoke about the need for mercy and forgiveness often, through his preaching and in parables like The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32).

During times of reflection Jesus stressed the need for mercy too. Through the Lord’s Prayer, he taught his followers that they are to forgive others their failings, as God the Father forgives theirs (Matthew 6:12).

In his actions, Jesus demonstrated how, when we act with mercy we imitate God, and our lives, the lives of others, and the life of the world, are greatly improved.

SLIDE THREE

But as we know, being merciful is at times the complete opposite of what we feel like doing, especially if we’ve been hurt.

Social media, music, film and television can intensify these negative feelings by communicating the message that problems are resolved not with mercy, but by being aggressive and seeking revenge.

Jesus knew that aggression and vengeance lead to greater destruction, and that without mercy the bonds uniting people are too easily cut, leading us to become more fearful of each other, closed minded and unhappy.



Extension task

The images on screen are taken from popular TV soap operas. These aggressive screenshots are in stark contrast with the scriptural quotation, also on screen, taken from the Gospel of St Luke:

'Love your enemies, do good to them... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' Luke 6:35,36

- Ask students if they can recall a soap opera story line in which Jesus’ teaching on mercy was employed. Ask them to explain what happened next. How might the storyline or characters been affected if mercy had not been shown?
- Ask students what people might need to help them love enemies and show mercy.
- Ask students to reflect on whether they are able to apply Jesus’ teaching in their lives.

Extension Activity – Breaking Bonds, Part One: You will need a long stretch of thin rope (2-3 metres), a pair of scissors, and four volunteers.

Let's conduct a little activity to illustrate how easy it is to break bonds that unite us:

- Ask three volunteers to stand at the front of the assembly space, slightly apart, and to hold the rope aloft. Explain to the whole student body that the rope is a symbol for the values that bond people together. Ask what these values might be (for example, trust, cooperation, loyalty).
- After students have offered suggestions, reiterate that such values bond us. Then ask the fourth volunteer to cut the rope in between each rope bearer. This should mean two rope bearers are left holding one severed section and one student holding two severed sections.
- Comment on how quick and easy it was to cut the bond we'd created, as it is when harsh words and actions breaks trust between people. Explain also that in comparison it can take much time and effort to restore broken bonds. **In this assembly we'll hear how, by being merciful as God is, even the most painful divisions are healed.**
- Ask the rope bearers to place their sections of rope on the floor and return to their seats. Having the students sit near the front of the assembly space would be preferable, as you will be asking them to step forward and retie the rope later.

SLIDE FOUR

Jesus was aware that we are all capable of breaking bonds. So as part of our call to be merciful and forgiving, Jesus instructed his followers to reconcile differences.

- Can anyone explain what reconciliation means?

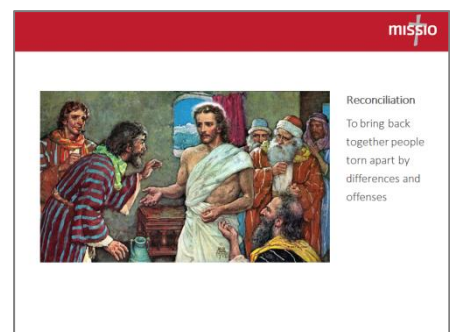
[Click to reveal definition](#)

To reconcile means to bring back together people torn apart by differences and offences.

This is not easy to do. To reconcile, individuals need to be penitent, accept failings, show understanding, forgive from the heart and move on together.

Jesus knew that in spite of the parables he shared and the many lessons he taught, encouraging his followers to forgive and be reconciled was never going to be easy. So he communicated God's call for mercy in the greatest way possible, through his own death and resurrection.

On the day of his crucifixion Jesus cried from the cross 'Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34)



Then, following his resurrection, Jesus returned to his disciples making it clear that they were not to seek revenge. Rather, they were to follow Jesus' path of mercy and peace (John 20:20-22).

In one part of the world, Jesus' lesson is being followed in an extraordinary way. Let's hear about that now.

SLIDE FIVE

This is Concilie (far left) and her neighbour, Paschal. They live in Rwanda, a country in Africa (indicated on the map).

- Has anyone heard of Rwanda and if so, what can they tell us about it?

In 1994, when Paschal was about 14 years old, Rwanda was plunged into chaos, resulting in genocide.

- Can anyone explain what genocide means?

[Click to reveal definition.](#)

Genocide - The deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular nation or ethnic group.

Rwanda's genocide was particularly ugly because friends, neighbours, even members of the same family attacked one another. It was also especially violent. In the course of just 100 days, around one million people were killed.

Concile (on the left) is a Hutu and before the genocide she was happily married to a Tutsi. Together they had eleven children. Paschal (on the right) also a Hutu, was their neighbour.

Paschal along with other Hutu teenagers had been encouraged to think the worst of the Tutsi's, but none of them thought to question why. So when the genocide began, Paschal and his gang were quick to attack Tutsi families. One of the families they attacked was Concile's. As she is a Hutu, they didn't kill Concile. But they did kill her Tutsi husband and their eleven children.



Extension task

As a teenager Paschal was led to believe that Tutsi's were enemies. He was told this by influential people around him and by the media. He failed to question this view and the result was terrifying.

Pope Francis has said: *'So beautiful are those young people... who are not happy with simplistic answers, who seek the truth and go further.'*

- Do you think young people today 'seek the truth'? Do they question the views around them?
- What do you think young people should question and how could they do this?

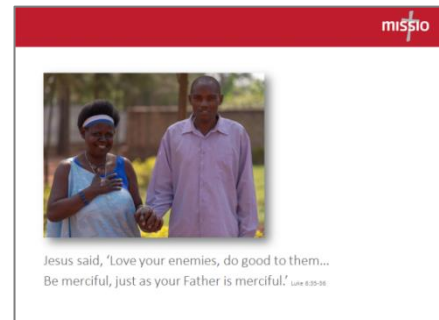
The photo you can see on screen is of Concile and Paschal today. I'm sure you are wondering how they can they stand together like that, smiling and holding hands? But a lot has happened between then and now.

Paschal was sent to prison for many years after the genocide. Concile tried to continue her life at home, but the years were filled with pain and anger. Until one day, seeking guidance, she picked up her Bible and read these words...

SLIDE SIX

Love your enemies, do good to them... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Luke 6:35-36

- How do you think reading these words made Concile feel?
- How would you feel if you read them?



Although these words challenged Concile, they also brought her hope. She understood that by showing mercy to her enemies, just as Jesus did, she could move on from hurt and find peace.

Concile knew this wouldn't be easy and that she would need the support of others. So she turned to the Church.

The Catholic Church in Rwanda had recognised that, following the genocide, people would need special help to heal. So the Church began organising counselling and reconciliation programmes. The Pope's charity, Missio, helped to pay for these programmes and for the rebuilding of churches destroyed in the genocide.

The support provided by the Church helped Concile to heal, but her call to be merciful was tested when Paschal was released from prison and started attending church too. Concile needed God's grace to be merciful to Paschal, and she found this grace through prayer and through the Eucharist.

Strengthened by her faith, Concile was finally able to show Paschal mercy when he asked for her forgiveness. Neither she or Paschal have forgotten wrongs done in the past, but they have chosen to learn from them and move on.

Concile and Paschal are witnesses to how, when we allow God's love to work through us, people can be reconciled, broken bonds repaired, and peace established.

Extension task – Broken Bonds, Part Two:

- Ask the rope bearers to step forward and work together to re-tie their cut pieces.

Explain that although it would be possible for just one person to retie the rope, the task would be difficult and the knots wouldn't be as secure. By working together the restored rope is stronger, as are we.

- Once all the sections are re-tied have the rope bearers' stand in a line with the rope held aloft.
- Ask what has happened to the students now the rope has been restored?

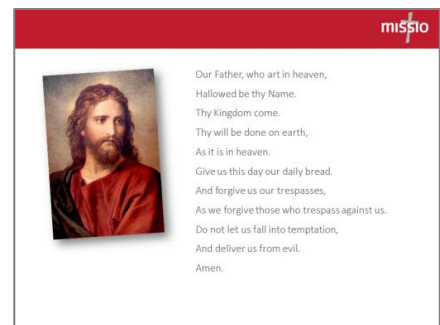
They are drawn closer together; as are we seek forgiveness, show understanding and mercy, and are reconciled.

SLIDE SEVEN

At the start of this assembly, you were asked to consider these words of Pope Francis.

'God wants you to be signs of his merciful love for our time!'

Inspired by Concile and Paschal's story, let's look at ways we can be signs of God's merciful love today.



[Click to reveal bullet points](#)

- Remembering how Concile and Paschal needed the support of the Church community, let's commit to being a support to those struggling in our school community and parish.
- Remembering how media messages promote conflict and blame, let's use our lives to promote God's message of reconciliation and mercy.
- Remembering how Concile and Paschal were helped through the Pope's charity, Missio, let's aim to support Missio's work through sharing what we can, and through prayer.

And let's make a start now, by finishing our assembly, with the prayer Jesus taught us, a prayer that reminds us to forgive as God forgives and to recognise everyone as our brothers and sisters – all children of God.

[Click to reveal The Lord's Prayer](#)

(Adapted to incorporate Pope Francis' suggested rewording)