



In the flow of grace given

This sermon was preached on the Sunday following the death of Mercedes (Didi) Pavlicevic, a longstanding and valued member of the St James's family

*God our father and our mother,
You have made us for yourself:
Our hearts are restless
Till they find their rest in you.
Teach us to offer ourselves ...
That we may have your peace,
And in the world to come may see you
face to face
Through Jesus Christ, our Friend and
Brother. Amen.*

That prayer comes from Monica Furlong. It is modelled after a prayer of St Augustine: the faith of a modern Christian building on the faith and the prayers of the past. I've been reading her prayers and poems this week. To be exact, this week, from the day I received the news that Mercedes had died, as you heard earlier, at peace, in the company of the women closest to her.

Spending time with Furlong's prayers and poetry has been my way of thinking of Mercedes as part of the generation of women who have given us the kind of church we have today.

It's a generation I don't belong to. A culture I do not come from. An experience and a struggle of women which is not mine, and is not mine to speak for.

Monica Furlong had been writing since the 1960s about her beliefs in an inclusive Church: a Christianity in solidarity with those excluded from the church. As a journalist, as a poet, and as lay theologian, Furlong campaigned for women in the church, and was a long-time advocate for women's ordination. And once women were ordained for the first time in the Scottish and English churches, she championed women exercising authority and leadership in senior positions.

Monica Furlong was writing for the women of Mercedes' generation. And so her poems and prayer have given me this week a focus for my thoughts and prayers. Others of you will of course be able to say far more about Mercedes, as a friend, and as pillar of this church. And there will be opportunity to do that in the coming days.

There was a stunning picture of Mercedes that was shared in an email sent by two friends who knew her in Edinburgh, when Mercedes was doing her PhD. The photo dated from 1984. Imagine how much the world has changed – how much the Church – has changed since then. The email read: "Here is a photo of our beautiful friend Didi from 1984 when she was living in the Shindig Co-operative in Edinburgh."

Shindig Co-operative: the name alone tells a story. The photo shows a stunning young woman: with rich, dark hair; defined eyebrows; an open, intelligent face; wearing a blue, silk scarf around her neck. In the photo, Mercedes isn't quite thirty-years-old.

The email from her friends goes on to say: "Mercedes was a creative force within our idealistic little community, with her intelligence, insight, and wit." It's easy enough to imagine that kind of person and presence all those years, not so long ago.

For Monica Furlong, the work of re-making a Church for today had to begin with a work of the imagination, including by re-imagining the prayers we pray. And so she begins with her rendition of The Lord's Prayer, or The Prayer of Jesus, as she calls it:

*God, who cares for us
The wonder of whose presence fills us with awe,
Let kindness, justice and love shine in our world.
Let your secrets be known here as they are in
heaven.*

*Give us the food and the hope we need for today.
Forgive us our wrongdoing as we forgive the
wrong done to us.*

Let's pause there for a moment. What is at stake in these lines?

This injunction about forgiveness is a think related to that strange interjection in today's Gospel reading about sin against the Holy Spirit. I don't think any of us missed that. And either we read this as one of those things we wish Jesus hadn't said. Or we deal with it. And we face it: recognising first that it is strangely put because, of course, we think, surely God's attitude is always forgiving towards us.

So, what would be this unforgivable sin? One way we can look at it is that forgiveness is, as it were, a flow. Forgive us our wrongdoing as we forgive the wrong done to us. In the Lord's prayer, God's grace is counterpointed by the grace we extend to others. Not because grace is a kind tit-for-tat deal or a contract. But because for us, to have God's grace, to have forgiveness, is for it to flow through us, and to be seen in our forgiveness of others.

I studied with Eugene Peterson when I was at Theological College in Vancouver. Some of you know Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, his translation of the New Testament into a contemporary, and sometimes conversational English. Now, I mentioned a category of things you wish Jesus hadn't said. But when you read *The Message* translation of the Bible, you come across a category of things you can't believe it was Jesus who actually said it. Here's an example: Jesus is speaking about forgiveness as that flow, that outpouring of grace, through us, into others, in the two verses that follow directly from the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 (14-15):

In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't [say you have] forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others.

By this reading, Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit, GOD, continues to have an attitude of grace and forgiveness towards me. But if I turn away, and withhold grace from others, then I will miss the mark, lose the plot, and turn away from grace.

But the opposite is also true. And there is so much in this passage about the unrelenting hope that comes from saying, Yes, faith is real, forgiveness and peace are here, and, Yes, we will continue in this flow of grace that we have both to give and to receive.

In that Spirit, Monica Furlong finishes her version of The Prayer of Jesus:

*Protect us from pride and from despair
And from the fear and hate which can
swallow us up.
In you is truth, meaning, glory and power,
While worlds come and go.*

During the week, we had a group of Americans visiting our church. These were seminarians, theology students, and ordained ministers from various church traditions, and coming from different parts of the US. It's the fourth year they have come to St James's, and to other churches in London, namely, to see first-hand what they consider innovative, pioneering CofE churches in London.

Ray Crocker was here, weaving masterfully the history of this parish and this church building with the story of this church congregation today, and what we look like today. Yesterday, the group met for the final time over brunch, along with some of the other ministers from other churches they have visited this week. As they reflected on what they are taking back with them to their church communities in the States, one person said: *You have in London churches where the ministry of all the baptised, not just from the ordained clergy, but churches where everyone is valued, everyone included, everyone has something to give to the life of the church.*

Then someone else spoke about St James's Piccadilly in particular: *At St James's, she said, everything you do is planted on the soil of prayer, rooted in the Eucharist, and grows around a living faith. And whatever you do, you do it in HOPE.*

My own place in the church as an ordained minister, and in this church, trails behind the church that women like Monica Furlong have shaped and directed with resilience, grace, and vision. And I think here of the church that Desmond Tutu envisioned in a well-known sermon on John 12:

When Jesus spoke of being lifted up on the cross he said “I, if I be lifted up, will draw ALL – draw all to me and hold them.” All of us drawn into the divine embrace that excludes no-one – black, white, rich, poor, male, female, young, old, gay, lesbian, so-called straight. All, all belong in this family.

That’s the kind of church Mercedes helped to build, and certainly, in her time at St James’s, firing a vision, deep in its roots, and flowing with grace.

There will be time to remember Mercedes, to give thanks for the love she shared with Mary, and for you to say more about what she means to you. For me, she is someone who showed me something of what it looks like to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer (Roman 12.12).

[from the day’s Gospel]

One day Jesus’ mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent for him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, they are asking for you.’ And Jesus replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around

him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

Ivan Khovacs

Mercedes (Didi) Pavlicevic 1955-2018



Edinburgh 1984 (referred to in text)