“Show yourself at all times glad and joyful, 
for almighty God loves a cheerful giver”

Mary Ward

Over four hundred years ago, Mary Ward, the foundress of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, left us a sure and certain pathway into authentic Christian spirituality and living. The Values she spoke of, and indeed lived, are a well-trodden way into the heart of all that Jesus taught and invited us into. Those Values are Sincerity, Justice, Freedom, Verity and Felicity. This year all Loreto schools in Australia are celebrating the Value of Felicity. This means that as a Loreto community, staff, students and parents, we have embarked upon a journey into just what it means to live in the way of Felicity, as Mary Ward understood it and lived it herself. What a wonderful opportunity to reflect upon and deepen our Christian stance in life and our fleshing-out of what we are called to. I say this because the way of Felicity is firmly grounded in the Christian spiritual tradition, and following this path will surely take us into the heart of what it is to live a deeply Christian life.

Our Loreto Schools Mission statement has some wonderfully uplifting words about what Felicity is. Felicity, we are told, manifests itself in joy, cheerfulness, good humour, happiness, hope, friendliness, courtesy, positive thinking, inner peace, courage, optimism, open-heartedness, light-heartedness and self-acceptance. These are what we might call the symptoms of Felicity. They are attractive qualities, I’m sure you’ll agree. It’s easy to warm to Felicity! However, the more I reflect on Felicity the more I am aware that it is possibly the most demanding of Mary Ward’s Values because we can’t possibly sustain all that without something very primary and essential to us that we are rooted in and from which we draw, day by day, amidst the oft-experienced chaos, or mundaneness, or the surprises of life.

Life throws much at us. Things do not always go our way. Each one of us will surely know times of struggle, anxiety, fear, concern for loved ones, illness and loss. It can be hard to be cheerful at such times or to sustain inner peace. We only have to tune in to the latest news report each day to feel bombarded by the darker aspect of humanity’s choices. As I write this, I have just watched the evening news: stories of suffering, cruelty, injustice, desperation and utter sadness, one after the other. How do we remain open-hearted and hope-filled when we witness the tragedies befalling others? How can we feel light-hearted when we are anxious and fretful? In the face of so much pain and darkness in our world our default position can all too often be a heaviness of heart, a gloominess. We can sink into a lacklustre way of living, into a closed-hearted self-preservation and a kind of ‘plodding along’. All these things are quite contrary to what Mary Ward spoke of and indeed the way she herself lived.
Felicity, if it is to be embraced at all, must be firmly grounded and lived in our everyday lives, such as they are. Felicity is not about being ‘upbeat’ all the time. No one can really sustain that. Felicity is also not dependent on whether things are going well for us, whether we have all we want. It’s easy to be cheerful in those situations. It’s not always the result of natural optimism. Mary Ward’s story shows us that there is something much more constant and ever-present at the heart of our lives that makes Felicity possible. Confronted with ill health, criticism of her work and condemnation by the Church she so loved and served, believing that she had been a failure, her capacity for joy, open-heartedness, hope and optimism was nevertheless boundless. What was at the heart of this? And what can we, immersed as we are in twenty-first century living, learn from this sixteenth century woman?

Marlene Marburg, in a few stunningly beautiful lines, captures this perfectly. She calls it “serious joy”:

You know about serious joy
deep in the chambers of the heart.
It can’t be ignored.
It is a piece of God’s own heart
thrown to you with dart precision.
And when it pierces your heart,
God sings the sound
consoling you, filling you
as if with an angel’s soft sigh.
Let God sink into you;
Sink into God where there are few words or none at all.
Feel the work gentling your trust;
The grace is for you.

At the core of Mary Ward’s life was certainly ‘a piece of God’s own heart’. She let God sing the sound – and above all she listened to that sound. Her story shows us that Felicity is possible, even when we are pulled about by many things, and when what may be happening around us is overwhelmingly dark and frightening.

Mary lived in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, a time when Catholics were hunted down and persecuted, when the possibility of dying for one’s faith was very real and was happening all around her. As a child Mary was fascinated with the idea of martyrdom for her faith, but as she matured she listened more and more deeply to what she called ‘God’s dream for her’, and as she said, felt a longing to respond to this invitation. From a young age she knew she wanted to give her all to God by becoming a nun, and later when she established the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary she encouraged all the women who joined her in her endeavour to shine brightly to the world. From within this abandonment to
God’s dream for her, this sinking into God, Mary found her joy and gratitude. There was no ‘what will become of me?’ or, ‘why couldn’t this have happened to someone else?’ but only deeply felt conviction that she was blessed, that in this encounter of Jesus dwelling in her, of God creating with her, there was hope and joy. And so it became Mary’s way to, “show yourself at all times glad and joyful, for almighty God loves a cheerful giver”.

Mary knew many dark days. While imprisoned in the Anger Convent in Munich in 1631, she wrote to her companions nearby: “I am in an enclosed convent, I know, and totally confined. Sometimes we fry, sometimes we freeze, and in this one room we do everything we have to do. Mass and the Sacraments are delights denied us. But despite this, our dwelling contains all we could wish for. I marvel at the fact that I can say this, but our Lord and Master, who is also a loving parent, respects our capacities as women and asks no more of us than we can bear with ease”. It is inspiring that during such trying times she was able to adopt such a positive attitude. It demonstrates not only her capacity, but also her willingness and courage to choose to do so. “Banish all inordinate sadness, showing always a cheerful temperament”, she said.

Mary’s conviction that she was utterly loved by God coloured all her relationships. Her open-heartedness extended not only to those who were most dear to her but to everyone. Rather than be driven by resentment, bitterness, anger or fear, her joy-filled nature reflected an enormous capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation. When she had received any injury, it was her special care first to find within herself an entire pardon of that person, deep and heartfelt, then to pray for them and seek out occasion to render them service. “If anyone gives you trouble, meet him with friendly words, for so you will soften both yourself and him”, she wrote.

What a legacy we have! And three centuries later, Mother Gonzaga Barry, who established the Loreto Foundations here in Australia, wrote about Felicity in a Christmas letter: “The happiest heart is childlike”, she said, “it never quite grows old; it sees the sunset’s splendour as it saw the dawning gold; it has a gift of gladness, its dreams die not away”.

Reflecting on the life and spirit of this remarkable woman, Mary Ward, we see so powerfully that she certainly and most authentically embodied the words of Jesus in John’s Gospel: “that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete”. We see so much of this joy in her writings too, in her choices and her attitudes. The question for us today is, of course, how we too might grow into Felicity. What do we need to do, what attitudes might we nurture so that our own lives really do embody all those wonderful characteristics and that our joy may be deep-seated and not vanish with changing fortunes.

To explore this, I am hoping to take you on a journey into Felicity over the next few weeks, a journey into what it means to develop a spirituality of joy, and I think the best way to
explore this is through stories. Stories are invitational, a powerful way of drawing us into understanding and truth. But they also take us beyond the head into a heart place, and touch us and speak to us on many levels: they speak to our dreams, our needs and fears and, if we let them, they will lead us into something new. The stories I’ve chosen are very simple: something biblical to start with this week, then something from the film, Chocolat, next week, and following that, a short extract from The Little Prince by Antoine De Saint Exupery. Perhaps some of these stories, or a few words or an image, may just speak to you wherever you are at that moment and hopefully leave you with a few thoughts and ideas that you can further explore in your own journey this year into what it means to live as a person of Felicity, in the fullness of joy that Jesus invites us into.

The first story is a re-telling of that well known Gospel story of the ‘Woman at the Well’ that we find in John’s Gospel. This is a truly inspired re-telling and extension of the story by a man called John Shea, and the link to the full story is below. But just to remind you of the story: it’s about a Samaritan woman who encountered Jesus at Jacob’s well as she went out in the heat of the day to fetch water. The Samaritans were neighbours of the Jews but were looked down upon by them. She is also a divorced woman, she has had five husbands, and as a result is an outcast in her little village. So she is triply despised: she is a woman, a Samaritan and divorced, and living in the shame of all that. But let’s see what happens!

To read John Shea’s story click on the link here.

The woman in this story, a nameless woman of Samaria, is taken on an amazing journey. A journey from humiliation, fear, marginalization, shame, loneliness, defensiveness, to a fountain of living water bubbling up inside her! So much so that she ran off to share that with the very people she had been afraid of! And they saw it in her. Great joy. So what happened?

There are two things that stand out for me. Firstly, she had to look at herself; she had to recognize the defensiveness that was her primary way of being and of relating to the world. She had to acknowledge that she had closed her heart. And she was coaxed out of it. That happened slowly. And that took courage and trust. All her energy to that point had been put into maintaining this defensiveness and this dis-ease in life. Her heart was closed: calculating the time of day she would go out for water, when no one else would be around – the other women went early in the morning when it was cooler and socialized there at the well; always expecting the worst from any encounter she might have; always expecting to be hurt and put down. Her self-esteem was in shreds. She certainly had no joy, no positivity; friendliness was denied her; it was all about survival. The first thing she had to do was stop running.
The second thing that strikes me is this: she entered into a relationship. As we saw she was very hesitant at first and there was a struggle. At first she acted out of her usual pattern and threw everything she had into trying to avoid relationship. The thing that is so powerful about that is the amount of energy that takes! I’m sure you’ll agree, it takes a lot of energy to remain in hurt, to remain in shame, to sustain a defensive stance towards life. And the more we do that the further away we move from inner peace or from a positive attitude or from any ability to be open-hearted.

But just contrast this to that amazing sense of life-filled energy and relief that came upon her when she let herself be touched by this man’s words and by his offer of living water. She drank thirstily, like a deer. She laughed high and long. She ran from house to house - to the very people she had previously avoided. And as the villagers said, it sounded like she had a fountain of living water bubbling up inside her!

It’s a beautiful and moving story and one we can all relate to in some way. We all have some hurt, some fear, some survival strategies perhaps. We are all thirsty! Mary Ward’s way of Felicity, and indeed the Christian spiritual path into joy, is all about being set free! We can talk about it in terms of being freed from... to be free for. Anthony De Mello was an Indian Jesuit who taught through stories, very simple stories that really can challenge us when we just stay with them and let them speak to us, and this is one of his stories which has much to say to us about being set free: “Said the jilted lover, I have burned my fingers once. I shall never fall in love again. Said the master, You are like the cat who, having burned itself from sitting on a stove, refused to sit again”. How easily that can happen to us!

Some years ago when I was doing studies in spiritual formation, one of my lecturers put it this way: imagine trying to cross a field – a cow field – full of dung, cow paddies. And each time you come to one you pick it up with a shovel and put it in the backpack on your back. Well, when you get to the other side you’ll have a huge bag of ‘you know what’ on your back! And this is exactly what this woman was carrying. What we need to do is take the shovel as we go, dig the dung into the ground and let it become fertile soil from which good things can grow. And that happened for the Samaritan woman when she finally admitted she was thirsty and she poured out her life story.

So we see that a spirituality of joy is about openness to life, even when we are ‘jilted’ or ‘burned’. Or, as in the case of our story, despised and hardened. We see that no matter the circumstances, we can choose a life-giving and positive response. We know this won’t always be easy. At times it may be faltering and hesitant. At times it may be nothing more than a cry of longing. But choose we must. Mary Ward knew this most profoundly and she lived in this way, no matter what difficulties she met with. It’s one of the defining characteristics of Mary:
“You, O Lord, know my heart”! she said.  
Make this heart complete as you would have it be.  
My heart is ready, O my God, my heart is ready!  
Put me where you want me to be.  
I am in your hand. Turn me this way or that, as you desire.  
I am yours, ready for everything”!

“I am yours, ready for everything”! Such openness to God will bring inner peace. It will halt our struggle to manipulate life and to close up when things are not favourable to us. Openness to Divine Goodness will result in optimism and positivity, for we will come face to face with a Power and Presence both greater than us, and deeply within us. Our vision will expand as will our horizons. Instead of fearing the worst, we will embrace what we can of goodness and offer ourselves in loving service. Such a choice will lead to good humour and cheerfulness as our defensiveness melts away. Like the woman at the well, Mary Ward was drawn by Christ, she let him take her hand, she let him give her to drink: “I had no other desire than to give myself over in all these difficulties and place myself with these uncertainties into the hands of God”, she said. And in that lay her joy, her peace, happiness and all she ever desired. In spite of suffering great adversity, shocking treatment at the hands of the Church, she never remained in that darkness or acted out of it. She never gave over her formation into the hands of negative forces.

And we are invited to do the same. Whether it’s facing what life give us, whether it’s hurtful and judgmental relationships which drain us of life, or tendencies within ourselves, our own demons that we all have to face, let’s not cross that field putting it all into the bag on our back. A spirituality of joy asks us to face it, not to be afraid, and above all to see ourselves in the context of that ‘something greater’, Divine Love. As Mary prayed:

“O parent of parents,  
And friend of friends,  
Without asking you took me into Your care  
And by degrees led me from all else  
That at length I might settle my love in You.  
O happy begun freedom, the beginning of all my good, and more worth to me than the whole world besides”.

And as we do this, may that peace and joy which surpass all understanding, find a home in us.

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