

A triple cord, strong and sure

A reflection on our school's Feast Day

“The views we have of the world and the ways we approach life may make a difference to many aspects of our being. In the basic elements of our lives – in striving to achieve our purposes, in our relationships with others, in our sense of who we are - our orientation to life makes a difference” (*Spirit Matters*, Peter Kaldor, Philip Hughes, Alan Black). These authors are referring to the ideas, beliefs, practices and traditions that we hold and are part of, the way we interpret the experiences we have and indeed the experiences we seek out and make possible - in other words, our worldview. The way we are, begins with the way we look at life.

Today is our school's Feast Day – Loreto Day – and as we reach out and celebrate who we are by walking alongside others – and this year it is the children and women of Nyumbani Home and Village in Kenya – it is also a time to pause and reflect on our community and the tradition we are part of.

There is a parable Jesus told about the fig tree: “Take the fig tree as a parable”, he said, “as soon as its twigs grow supple and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near”.



This is a great image to hold before us. The fig tree is brought to bloom in summer; it does not conceptualise summer; it *undergoes* summer. In the same way we undergo the presence of God in our lives. And when we do, we see the fruit of it. As I have been mulling over Loreto Day and who we are as a Loreto community, the identity we are celebrating today, I thought of this story of the fig tree. And I thought of all those Loreto women – from Mary Ward to the sisters today - whose lives have borne witness to the presence of God. We remember Mary Ward and her courage and vision four hundred years ago, her love of God and her willingness

to listen to God's dream for her and to do everything for God's glory. We remember Teresa Ball whose faith and dedication enabled her to establish a number of convents and schools in Ireland and elsewhere in the world in the eighteenth century. We remember Mother Gonzaga Barry and all those Loreto sisters who left their homes and came to this faraway land - Australia. We remember their courage, faith and dedication to girls' education as they left their homes and ventured into the unknown, far from all that was familiar. There is a beautifully moving story about Mother Gonzaga who, the day before she set sail, was asked by one of the sisters how she was feeling, and she replied: "My hands are in God's hands. He can lead me where he wills". This was Mother Gonzaga's orientation to life. And that made all the difference. Like the fig tree undergoing summer, bearing fruit as summer acted upon it, so too she acted under the influence, the presence, of God in her life. She gave herself over to it.

A hundred years ago the philosopher Nietzsche had his mythical madman smash a lantern in the marketplace at high noon and announce, "God is dead"! Nietzsche's 'death of God' is the cry we hear from so many people today. That cry is often angry and cutting, disparaging towards those who do profess belief in God, looking upon religious faith as an infantile stage of development. We are of course living in a world which is the product of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. A sense of God has been steadily slipping away on a rather large scale for the past two hundred years. Reason is the highest authority and together with Science will provide all that we need to know in answer to these big questions of life - questions of origin and destiny: where did I come from and where am I going? What are the beginnings and end of the universe? And of course this is true to a point. Science tells an utterly awe-inspiring story about our origins and how everything 'works'. And Reason is a marvellous human faculty. Today we live in a Post- Modern world, a world of individualism and relativism, where all previously-held truth is questioned and deconstructed and individual perspectives are paramount. One worldview is as good as another. In such a context secularism is increasing and the pews are emptying on Sundays. In this world of ours it is impossible to *prove* God's existence. But we do see the signs of it! And in our Loreto tradition we see the lived experiences of those wonderful women, shaped by God, *undergoing* God.

In her writings in *Eucalyptus Blossoms*, Mother Gonzaga said that she wished all her dear Loreto children would be like a row of goodly pearls. "I would string those pearls on a triple cord, strong and sure", she said. The pearl is a very powerful image of human formation. As the beauty of the pearl is the response of the oyster to the grit that gets into it, so our lives are formed and shaped by the way we respond to what life offers us. And how we respond will depend on our worldview, the lens through which we look at life and make sense of it. Mother Gonzaga may have had a number of things in mind as she spoke of stringing those pearls on a triple cord, but one of them would have been faith, a worldview which affirms the Divine Presence and the effect of this Presence on a life turned towards God.

This is what we remember and celebrate today. We are a community turned towards God. We are primarily a community which seeks to give the Spirit a home. We are the latest 'moment' in this four hundred year Loreto tradition of faithfulness. Ronald Rolheiser, in his book, *The Shattered Lantern*, says, "The existence of God, like the air we breathe, need not be proven. It is more a question of developing good lungs to meet it correctly". God is never an object that we know. God is our experience. God is the way we live. God is our orientation to life. There have always been and there always will be those who want proof of God's existence and when it is not forthcoming in a way that they find satisfactory, they will reject any notion of God. But they have missed the point and the heart of it.

Our Loreto tradition helps us develop the lungs to breathe in God's existence. In the story of the past four hundred years, in the lives and work of the sisters today and all those engaged in the Loreto mission, we see the fruits of lives turned to God, and they inspire us today. In the Mary Ward Values we find that strong cord Mother Gonzaga spoke of. As we face all that life offers us each day those Values are there to guide our decisions and shape us. They offer us a Gospel-centred way of life, a life lived close to Jesus, as Mary Ward counselled. They invite us to embrace all that Jesus spoke of and modeled himself: to seek the truth of all He reveals to us, to do justice, to be shaped by His words and to let that light shine, to be free enough to choose to see life in this way and to make these choices, and to do this joyfully. We are a community that reflects and discerns. Our actions are the fruit of this discernment as we listen to the stirrings of the Spirit and say 'yes' to those stirrings and 'no' to anything which would draw us away from Jesus' vision.

We pray a lot at Loreto, for in prayer we remember who we are and we remember where God is. "We must live in such a way that we give birth to God in our lives", says Rolheiser. And prayer is that place of gestation. We are a community for others too. Those 'others' are the people we share our days with here at Loreto and those beyond our walls. We know that all we have is pure gift and with that comes responsibility and obligations to others. All this is the cord upon which we are strung. It is our orientation to life. It is profoundly God-centred and it is a deeply religious way of life in an increasingly secular world.

John of the Cross, the great Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century, said that the language of God is the experience that God writes into our lives. This is how God 'speaks into' the world. In the discoveries of Science, inasmuch as it knows at any given time, is revealed the magnificence of the 'how' and 'where' of God's story in the universe. In the many faith traditions of our planet, we hear the voice of God. In goodness, love and light, wherever it is, we hear the voice of God. I cannot agree with Nietzsche that 'God is dead' - but I do think we need to open our eyes and our ears and develop a better set of lungs to breathe God in. What we need to have in order to possess a sense of God's presence in ordinary everyday life are not the kind of

miracles or proofs that so drastically change ordinary reality so as to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is a world of the supernatural beyond our natural world. What we need to have is a deeper sense of how God is already present and acting in the seemingly ordinary events of our lives. In his book, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis places these words into Christ's mouth:

"Jesus' eyes flashed. Though he was in front of such a great multitude, his heart felt no fear. He parted his lips. 'Brothers', he shouted, 'open your ears, open your hearts – I ran here ... to announce the happy news for the first time. What happy news? The Kingdom of God has come'! An old man with a double hump like a camel's lifted his chaplet and cackled, 'Vague words, the words you speak, son of the carpenter, vague, groundless words. 'Kingdom of heaven', 'justice', 'freedom', and 'grab what you can boys, it's all for the taking'. I've had enough! Miracles, miracles! I want you to do something here and now. Perform some miracles to make us believe in you. Otherwise, shut up! 'Everything is a miracle, old man', Jesus replied. 'What further miracles do you want? Look below you: even the humblest blade of grass has its guardian angel who stands by and helps it to grow. Look above you: what a miracle is the star-filled sky! And if you close your eyes, old man, what a miracle the world within us! What a star-filled sky is our heart! The people listened to him, and the clay within them turned into wings. The entire time this betrothal lasted, if you lifted a stone you found God underneath, if you knocked on a door, God came out to open it for you, if you looked in the eye of your friend or your enemy, you saw God sitting in the pupil and smiling at you".

As a Loreto community, founded upon the Ignatian charism of "finding God in all things" we are 'betrothed to God'! We have much to celebrate today and be thankful for. And as our Year 11 students lead us today in compassion and care for the women and children of Nyumbani in Kenya and support the work there of Loreto sister, Sister Mary Owens, let us be thankful that our community, like that fig tree undergoing summer, continues to undergo God! We are all blessed to be attached to that triple cord, strong and sure.

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