

## ***Bumping into Mary Ward ...***

### ***Bumping into Jesus ...***

Last week in conversation with Fr Michael Stoney SJ, whom we are fortunate to have preside at many of our school Eucharists and who always has wonderful words of wisdom, he told me a lovely story which set me thinking about the foundress of our own community, Mary Ward. During his time as principal of Xavier College in Melbourne, a rather large statue of St Ignatius of Loyola was made for the college and the decision had to be made as to where to place it. He suggested that it be placed right in the middle of a very busy corridor, but the objection was raised that the boys would bump into it. Fr Michael responded that that was just the point, to bump into Ignatius, and that if they bumped into him, they would bump into Jesus as well. Well, that got me thinking about that wonderful woman, Mary Ward, about what it might mean to bump into her, and how that might indeed mean that we bump into Jesus. As you may know we have a beautiful statue of Mary Ward in the quad outside the Gonzaga Barry Centre and she is in full view every day as the girls and staff cross the courtyard or sit out there during recess and lunch. I often find myself drawn to a moment sitting out there contemplating Mary and wondering about her. There are two other wonderful Loreto women in our tradition, Gonzaga Barry and Teresa Ball, and I think that, equally, to bump into them is to bump into Jesus as well, and I hope to share some thoughts about them in future reflections. But first of all, Mary Ward, and how her life, her longings and aspirations, her words, her commitment, her choices, her suffering, all speak of Jesus and lead us to him.



Let's begin by getting to know Mary Ward, the story of her life, what was important to this young woman as she grew up, what inspired her and shaped her and made her the person she was. Mary Ward's story began in 1585 in Yorkshire, in England, during the years when the Catholic Church in England was persecuted and Catholics were hunted down and punished, tortured and often put to death for refusing to give up their Catholic beliefs and practices. Mass was celebrated in secret, and many homes and chapels had priest holes, so that the priest could hide and escape if the authorities suddenly raided the place during Mass. Many Catholics

lived with the very real fear that they could be put to death. Mary was born into and grew up in this environment. Her childhood was spent with her parents, her grandparents and with other relatives and friends. All these people who were part of her early and teen-age years were devout, religious people who continued to live as Catholics in spite of the persecution. Mary saw in them a great faithfulness to God and to the Catholic Church, and they all had a great influence on Mary. Mary said this about her parents: 'My parents were both virtuous and suffered much for the Catholic cause'. She also wrote about the great love and generosity her father had towards the poor.

Later Mary spent some years with her grandparents. Her grandmother had been imprisoned for fourteen years when she was younger because she refused to give up her Catholic faith. She was also a woman of deep prayer and Mary wrote about how she would wake up during the night to find her grandmother in prayer. She also used to give food and other help to Catholic prisoners, and of course she had to do this secretly.

When Mary was fifteen she became aware that she was very drawn to the life of a nun. She wrote: 'When I was about fifteen years old, while living in the house of a relation of my mother, I had a religious vocation. This grace by the mercy of God has been so continuous that not for one moment since then have I had the least thought of embracing a contrary state.' At that time the only kind of religious life that was available was a life of strict enclosure. Nuns spent their days in prayer within the convents, and did not go out to do any work. Although Mary says she felt this kind of life was too focused on the self, she nevertheless made up her mind that she would do it well, and she was determined to join a very strict order of nuns, strict and secluded. However, everyone, her parents, friends and relatives, tried to talk her out of becoming a nun.

But Mary was deeply aware that she was being led into a life completely given over to God. She wrote this prayer: 'You took me into your care, and by degrees led me from all else, that at length I might see and settle my love in you.' Although Mary's parents were very religious they would not give their permission for her to become a nun. She was the eldest child and was much loved, especially by her father. He wanted Mary to marry and have children who would also grow up to be faithful Catholics. And of course, if Mary was to become a nun, she would have to leave England. However, Mary felt certain that God was calling her to this life. She wrote: 'I listened to God's deep dream and felt a longing to respond to God's invitation'.

So when she was twenty-one years old, she left England to go to Flanders (which is Belgium today) and she joined the Order of St Clare in St Omer. But Mary was not happy at St Omer in that particular community. She did not feel that this was the right place for her. But she lived there for some time and then, after much reflecting and pondering and trying to discern where she was meant to be, she left that community and established a convent of Poor Clare nuns for English women who wished to live that life. She was much happier in this new community and settled down to the life of a Poor Clare nun. Mary wrote: 'A monastery was built for such of our nation as desired to render themselves Poor Clares, in which holy Order I intended to live

and die; and I began to feel a great tranquillity of mind, often comforted to think that the rest of my days should be spent in quiet and with God alone.'

However, this soon changed, and Mary has given us this account of what happened to her on the Feast Day of St Athanasius in the year 1609: 'This quiet lasted many weeks, in which space upon St Athanasius his day, I was sitting at work with the rest, reciting privately the litany of our Lady, when there happened a thing of such nature that I knew not, nor ever did know, how to explain. It appeared wholly divine and came with such force that it annihilated and reduced me to nothing and of this only was I conscious: here it was shown me that I was not to be of the Order of St Clare; some other thing I was to do. What or of what nature I did not see, nor could I guess, only that it was to be a good thing and what God willed.'

Six months later Mary left the Order of St Clare. But she did not stop doing the kind of things she felt she was called to do. She lived in London where she spent her days doing good works for people in need; she visited people in prison; she spent much time in prayer and fasting. She did all this so that she might grow in understanding what it was that God was leading her to do. And because Mary knew in her heart that she wanted to lead the life of a nun, she thought that perhaps she should join the Order of St Teresa and become a Carmelite nun. This was the year 1609 and it was in this year that Mary finally understood what God was leading her into and inviting her to do. She wrote: 'One morning, going to dress myself according to the fashion of the country and other circumstances, whilst I adorned my head at the mirror, something very supernatural befell me, similar to that already related on the day of St Athanasius, but more singular, and as it appears to me, with greater force, if there could be. And it was shown to me with clearness and inexpressible certainty that I was not to be of the Order of St Teresa, but some other thing was determined for me, without all comparison more to the glory of God than my entrance into that holy religious Order. I did not see what the assured good thing would be, but the glory of God which was to come through it, showed itself inexplicably and so abundantly as to fill my soul in such a way that I remained for a good space without feeling or hearing anything but the sound, GLORY, GLORY, GLORY. All appeared to last but a moment, even at those times when afterwards I made a computation and found it to have been about two hours. On this occasion a good deal of time passed before I recovered, but returning to myself, I found my heart full of love for this thing. Accompanied by such glory that not yet can I comprehend what it is. At this time God helped me, as I trust he will in all.'

And so, in 1609, four hundred years ago, began the story of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is a story which continues today. It is a story founded on the love of one woman for God; the desire to give herself completely to God, holding nothing back, desiring nothing else. It is the story of a woman who inspired others to do the same; a woman who struggled to keep her vision alive through opposition, lack of understanding by others, persecution and opposition which, sadly, came to her from both without and through the Church she loved so much. It is the story of a woman whose work and values endure today although she died believing her life's work to be a failure and with a Bull of Suppression issued by the Vatican on the Institute.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta who was a Loreto sister for twenty years before moving out to form her own order in Calcutta, said that Mary Ward is God's gift to the Church and to the world, but that she could be this gift only because she, like Mary, the mother of Jesus, was the 'handmaid of the Lord'. We are all familiar with the exclamation of Mary the mother of Jesus, as the invitation and the call to open herself fully to God came to her: 'Let what you have said be done to me', she said. And this is Mary Ward's story to.

'Then moved not to desire anything but God's will, I inwardly said,  
"Neither life nor death my God,  
But thy holy will be ever done in me.  
What pleases you best, that do;  
Only this, let me no more offend you,  
Nor leave to do what you would have me" '.



As we look upon the beautiful portrayal of Mary Ward in our quad, we see expressed there her life, her words, her passion, and we know that the artist, Meliesa Judge, spent much time reading about her, pondering her life and her spirit and getting to know this woman from within. There is something serene and yet determined in her eyes; both gentleness and strength are captured in her face. There is simplicity too; she is dressed simply, she is on a journey, her satchel on her back, and she is wearing those simple and sturdy walking shoes. We know that Mary crossed the Alps, on foot, several times, in those simple shoes as she travelled to Rome to plead the case for her Institute to the pope. And that in itself is a remarkable thing and tells us so much about the inner strength and determination, the courage and passion of this often physically frail and unwell woman. She is moving; she has somewhere to be, something to do. She seems committed, but not rushed, and it's always tempting to want to take her hand, as sometimes the girls do.

But the thing that always moves me is her gaze. She is looking out into the distance. There is something she sees, something that draws her on and she is moving towards that and in

response to that. She is a pilgrim. She is on a journey to a holy place, a sacred place, and that holy place is both within her and it is where she is going and what she will do.

To really understand Mary Ward's work, her values and the path she has left for us, we need to get inside this woman, we need to look out through her eyes. Mary was a woman in love with God and Mary was consumed with a passion to give herself entirely to God. 'I will give Him what I have; and all that I need I will find in Him', she said, and if we were to say nothing else about Mary Ward, that would say it all. God was her inspiration, her beloved, her strength, and as she said, she never for a moment doubted her vocation to give herself completely to God and to do everything for God's greater glory: 'O 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.' She never wavered in her abandonment to God, and the suffering, rejection and persecution by the Church, the disappointment of the apparent failure of all she lived and worked for, the anxiety she felt about the whereabouts of her scattered communities under the suppression by Rome, and of course her ill health, she saw as simply part of the road she had to walk in the fulfilling of God's will: 'I offered myself so that I might suffer with love and joy everything that came to me by way of need and opposition in the fulfillment of his will'.

One of Mary's faithful companions said of her: 'The name Jesus was her first and last word, the beginning and ending of all her prayers, her refuge in all dangers and her protection from all evil'. Mary's life and words illustrate profoundly the call of Jesus to all who are struggling and burdened, to come to him, and his promise of peace and rest: 'Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart' (Matthew 11:28-29). Mary responded to this invitation and did indeed learn from her Lord as she lived out that profound trust in God in her own time and place, with the particular burdens she had to bear, and the difficulties she faced and endured, even though she died believing her life's work had been a failure. 'Do not doubt, God will help', she said. In her struggle and persecution we see something of the darkness Jesus entered into as he died on the cross, subjected to a humiliating and shameful death, the death of a criminal. His prayer, as he struggled alone the night before he died, was to offer himself in complete surrender to God in the darkness of pain and unknowing, yet in the light of trust. And Mary did as her Lord did. She is a model for all of us of perseverance and abandonment to God in the darkness of pain and failure. And as a result, here we all are today!

In her Rule for the Institute, Mary took on the spiritual practices of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), the Spiritual Exercises, and thus the daily practice of the *examen* was part of her life. The *examen* had been developed by St Ignatius (the founder of the Society of Jesus) as a way of ensuring that the members of the Society stayed 'on track'. It is a daily reflection and prayer, looking back over the day, identifying what has brought joy, peace, contentment and therefore

closeness to God, and what has brought the opposite, restlessness, disturbance, discomfort, and therefore has taken us away from God. The *examen* asks us to look at ourselves in the light of the Gospels, the person, life and teachings of Jesus: how well are we doing in our life as disciples of Jesus? Are we growing in faithfulness to his teachings? Are we becoming more Christ-like? Mary Ward, in recognizing the immense value of this practice and adopting it, shows us how to remain faithful to him. To take this on as a daily practice means that we are constantly encountering Jesus, letting him speak into our hearts, invite and challenge us, and lead us on.

Mary embraced a life of selflessness. She discerned the need of her day and threw herself wholeheartedly into doing something about it. The need she recognized was that of the education of girls. She recognized the great importance of rights for women in the seventeenth century. That sense that there was something 'other' she was called to do is what drove her to leave the enclosed order of the Poor Clares which was the acceptable form of religious life for women at that time and venture into something radical and utterly unacceptable to some. She was attentive to the stirrings of her heart, which is how God 'speaks' to us. She became a pioneer of unenclosed religious life for women, a life of active service in the world. Her critics disparagingly referred to Mary and her companions as 'the galloping girls'. 'It seems right that, according to their condition, women also should and can provide something more than ordinary in the face of the common need', she wrote. 'We also feel that God (as we trust) is inspiring us with the pious desire that we should embrace the religious life and yet that we should strive according to our littleness to render to the neighbour the services of Christian charity, which cannot be discharged in the monastic life'. She refers to this as a 'mixed life', 'such a life as we learn Christ our Lord and Master taught his chosen ones'. Perhaps our familiarity with religious sisters engaged in many kinds of active work in the community can dull our appreciation of the courage of this woman who dared to stand tall in the face of the censure of the institutional Church and the criticism and lack of understanding of many. Being a pioneer of a new way of thinking and acting is always difficult and Mary's life speaks to us beautifully of the power of the Holy Spirit at work within those who listen to God's call. Her aim was to enable girls to take their place in both the secular and monastic life, as they might so choose.

The 'Christian charity' Mary spoke of is characterised by love for everyone, no matter who they are or what they do, service of the poor, never being content to rest until all have sufficient access to the goods of this world, providing for people's material as well as spiritual needs. It is to remember that whatever we do 'to the least of my sisters and brothers', as Jesus said, we do to him. Mary was ever faithful to Jesus, her heart set on living, with total devotion, the two aspects of the life of a Christian: love of God and love of others. She embodied in her own life the words of Jesus: 'Remain in me. I am the vine you are the branches ... My Father is glorified

by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love' (John 15). And the joy and peace she knew, despite the difficulties and suffering, are a visible expression of the promise of Jesus who said, 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you' (John 15). Mary shows us what it means to be called to friendship with Jesus. We simply cannot speak of Mary Ward without speaking of Jesus as a constant companion, friend, refuge, and the way to God. Friendship with Jesus does not mean that things will always be easy or that joy will be experienced as 'all going well'. It does show us, however, that walking the path of Jesus, in love and fidelity to his teachings, will take us to the cross, to abandonment to God, and to the suffering that may come our way because of our fidelity. And our joy will be in knowing that we are faithful and that we are loved. She models for us, through her love of God, her fidelity to prayer and service, just how to walk this way. She inspires us, as Jesus himself did, to be faithful to the task of creating God's Kingdom on earth.

Jesus' teachings have been expressed by Mary Ward in the five Values we have from her: Freedom, Verity, Justice, Felicity, and the one we are focusing on this year, Sincerity. This is her vision, love and service of God and others, as lived and taught by Jesus, and the challenge to each of us is to embrace this vision too. And women are called to full participation in this mission. Freedom, as she understood it, is the freedom to refer all things to God, to consider all choices and actions in the light of God's 'will' as we know it in and through Jesus, to reject anything which may pull us away from that. 'If you keep my word' said Jesus, 'you will know the truth and the truth will set you free' (John 8). This is the truth, Verity, the truth of our identity as beloved of God, called to companionship with Jesus, and with the power of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all that is good. Justice is about right relationships, with God, with others and with creation. It is to have a humble spirit, to embody mercy and seek peace, to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger, and to do all this as Jesus modelled and taught. In these Values we see the defining characteristics of the life that followers of Jesus are called to live. Sincerity is to accept who we are, to embody a radical consistency between our inner being and our actions, to let God's Spirit have its way with us, and to grow into goodness as followers of Jesus and so let our light shine. And of course, Felicity, the utter joy of a life lived in this way, the joy promised by Jesus.

Over four hundred years ago Mary Ward's companions were invited to leave all that was safe in their lives and trust in the goodness of God. They joined her in this endeavor and like Mary they were women of deep faith, love of God and the desire to serve. And today, as we too join

this endeavor, she will set us out along a sure path with Jesus. Mary shows us what it is to be a disciple, to say 'yes' to Jesus' invitation to each of us to 'Come, follow me' (Matthew 4). 'Satisfy yourself with nothing that is less than God', said Mary. So here is this woman who today, four hundred years on, still inspires us, invites us to walk with her, to see the world as graced and blessed as she did and never to compromise that vision, to cling to the teachings and presence of Jesus, as she did, knowing that indeed life is there, to have courage to face our difficulties and our pain, whatever they may be, as she did, trusting in God's care, to awaken each day, as she did, with joy in our hearts, knowing that it is indeed the day God has made and that because of that, today is filled with possibility to do good, to love, to grow, to work, to bless the world with our presence. And to do all this for the greater glory of God.

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