

## ***With whom or what do we collaborate?***

Tomorrow is Remembrance Day and as we do each year at this time we reflect on war and peace. As these thoughts come and go I find myself inevitably pondering human nature and human endeavour and the choices we make, both as individuals and collectively. In all these endeavours and choices, we ultimately collaborate with 'something' or someone, with ideas and ideologies, movements, trends, worldviews, perspectives, beliefs. And then there is grace.

Our spiritual journey is a path of grace and our measure of how well we're doing is how fully the way of Jesus has taken root in us and is flourishing. How well we collaborate with it. And the way of Jesus is nothing less than a radical openness to God! The path of grace is really all about tuning in to God's ever-present, gentle but insistent, and freely-given offer of life, love, goodness. St Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, passionately declared, "Glory be to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20 – 21). This must surely be one of the most exciting and hope-filled declarations in Scripture! Whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever we are doing and whatever our gifts, strengths and abilities might be, the path of grace lies open to us and beckons to us. And, as Paul points out, this is about possibility, transformation, growth. And, it is about transformation and growth beyond what we ourselves can often even imagine for ourselves. How fully do we collaborate with grace, with the possibilities of what or who we might become if we allow ourselves to be led by all that is life-giving and of love and goodness?

Dorothy McRae-McMahon, a Uniting Church minister, in her book, *Everyday Passions*, gives us a beautiful sense of what Paul is saying in his letter to the Ephesians. She spells out for us what may happen in this conceiving of possibility and bringing it to life: "We are all, if we are open to it, in some cosmic connection of concern and the endless renewing of life and hope. I think that the good life has about it a creative passion for the supremacy of love. This love is not sentimental. It is about the amazing conceiving of new possibilities, and about the nurturing of that conception in a myriad of ways. The nurturing of this conception of new possibilities involves a generous sharing of all that you are, with the evolving new life – a cherishing of it, as you rock it in a womb-space under your heart. It is cared for there because of your love of life itself and your cherishing of this vulnerable newness. Then one day, you enter the labour and pain of bringing something to birth and both you and the new life grow in this magnificent undertaking". She has chosen her words well, and in doing so offers us some powerful images and something real to hold onto and to guide us: hope and life are endlessly renewed, possibility must be conceived, cherished, brought to birth, and we need to give our all to make this possibility a reality.

Our own growth and transformation and the bringing to birth of what we ourselves may not even imagine are nothing less than a partnership with God. Grace asks of us that we become partners with God. We are invited to co-operate with God. Grace never overrides our freedom to choose. It may urge itself into our awareness, point to doors that we may open, paths that we may choose, but without our response, without our co-operation it will fizzle away. In

John's visionary writing, The Book of Revelation, the last Book in the New Testament, we find Christ saying: "Listen, I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Revelation 3:20). This is an invitation which is rich in possibility. "I will eat with you, and you with me", suggests both intimacy and a new way of being. But we need to open the door. We need to give ourselves to this possibility in love.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon uses the word 'cherish'. She offers a powerfully feminine image of cherishing possibilities in a womb-space, the place where life grows, and then giving birth. Cherish is a beautiful word, for to cherish something is to hold it deeply in our heart. It means to enable it to grow and flourish. We cherish things that are of great significance to us - we give our heart to them, we care for them. Those of us who are parents know that we cherish our children, we nurture their growth and allow them to be born in so many ways. We know too as parents that that 'birth', in fact those many 'births' of our children, may take place in ways that we ourselves have not envisaged, that so often delight us, sometimes surprise us and sometimes challenge us. Sometimes we resist them and fight them. They sometimes open doors we would rather not walk through. This cherishing of our children's 'births' is a deep love which will in fact *lead us*. And so it is when we cherish grace and all the possibilities it offers us. Grace will certainly lead us into places we may not have dreamed of going.

As we look at the life of Mary Ward we see a fulfilment of what St Paul pointed to and what Dorothy McRae-McMahon describes. In her we see the measure of a life truly lived in openness to grace. As a young woman Mary was drawn to religious life. She had a real conviction that God was calling her there. She responded to this offer, to this grace, but the details of it were as yet unknown to her, and as it turned out, it took her to a place beyond her imagining. "Put me where you want me to be", she said. "I am in your hand. Turn me this way or that, as you desire. I am yours, ready for everything". And so it was to be! It was Mary's readiness for 'everything', her willingness to listen, her willingness to be led, that allowed the possibility of an uncloistered life for women religious of that time to come to fruition. It demanded courage of her, the ability to step beyond the known, the freedom to let God have God's way with her. She had to open the door to that insistent prompting and collaborate with it. She had to see the restlessness she felt as she embraced various forms of religious life of the day as nothing other than her deep cherishing of her desire to give herself over utterly to God's will for her. She had to move beyond the sense of failure she felt at these first attempts at religious life. She had to endure criticism and condemnation, not least of all from the Church she loved. And she had to trust that grace would lead her to where she was meant to be. "O my God what would I be if you had not done everything for me!" she said. Mary's wholehearted commitment was to God's way for her, and she was free enough not to hold onto anything that might detract from that, even if that 'something' was good in itself. She is an inspiring example for us of a woman co-operating with grace.

This is the freedom we all need if we are to cherish possibilities. It means being freed from anything that would limit us, anything that would enslave us and control us and take us away from that rich life of grace, the life of God's Spirit within us. If we are bound to well-known

patterns of thinking and acting we will simply not allow God's Spirit to work in us. There are many such patterns we may have. Some of them may be obviously unhelpful in living a life in response to grace - patterns of poor choices, unloving attitudes and behaviour, addictive behaviour of many kinds, self-centredness, greed, anger, cynicism, moral lethargy, loss of enthusiasm, all those things that are life-denying and unloving. But sometimes too those patterns may in fact be good and loving in themselves, and then it becomes hard to be willing to listen more deeply, to surrender to that insistent knock, to allow new possibilities to emerge and to cherish them into life. This becomes particularly difficult and challenging for people who in a very real way are saying yes to a life lived in faith, for even here, there can be a real unwillingness to listen more carefully for that knock.

At heart, to be open to grace and to cherish possibilities are really the refusal to live a divided life. When we refuse to live a divided life, we surrender to God's life. One of our Loreto Values is Sincerity. Sincerity, as Mary Ward understood it, is to 'be such as you appear and appear such as you are'. It is about consistency, wholeness, 'what you see is what you get', and the courage to be who and what we most deeply are. But of course, the understanding is that who and what we most deeply are, is in fact the life God breathes into each one of us. Parker Palmer, in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, writes: "We are born with a seed of selfhood that contains the spiritual DNA of our uniqueness – an encoded birthright knowledge of who we are, why we are here, and how we are related to others. We abandon that knowledge as the years go by, but it never abandons us ... Philosophers haggle about what to call this core of our humanity ... Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it original nature or big self. Quakers call it the inner teacher or inner light. Hasidic Jews call it a spark of the divine. Humanists call it identity and integrity. In popular parlance people often call it soul. *What we name it matters little to me ... but that we name it matters a great deal.* For 'it' is the objective, ontological reality of selfhood that keeps us from reducing ourselves, or each other, to biological mechanisms, psychological projections, sociological constructs, or raw material to be manufactured into whatever society needs – diminishment of our humanity that constantly threaten the quality of our lives". In our Christian Tradition this 'it' is given shape in the person of Jesus. 'Come, follow me" (Mark 1:17), is the invitation, and it is an invitation that is certainly not without risk and will certainly take us into unimagined places. "We are cursed with the blessing of consciousness and choice, a two-edged sword that both divides us and can help us become whole. But choosing wholeness, which sounds like a good thing, turns out to be a risky business, making us vulnerable in ways we would prefer to avoid", writes Palmer. This risky business is played out, and often quite tumultuously, in the silent and personal space which is our inner being, in our consciousness, and indeed in our conscience. It is often a still, small voice that speaks quietly, yet insistently to us. The temptation can be to drown it out with our own rationalisation.

We have to choose what we will collaborate with! There are people in our world whose choice for wholeness has indeed taken them into dangerous places. I think of people like Martin Luther King Jnr, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Ghandi. What they cherished and gave birth to has changed the world for the better. 'Whistleblowers' go there. In the political world, in the corporate world, we find people whose innate sense of wholeness and justice will not allow

them to keep silent. We find such people in the Church too. And thankfully so. But so often they are punished for this and suffer great personal loss. I can't help thinking here of course of Jesus' words, "What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?" (Matthew 16:26). Those are words we would do well to keep before us each day.

So the question we must all ask ourselves is this: What do I collaborate with? Prejudice, fear, popularity, security, comfort, pleasure ...? If God is to do more in us than we can ever ask or imagine, as St Paul says, we will certainly have to collaborate with all that we see in the person and life of Jesus. And that, as we know, took him to the cross. And beyond. It will take us to the cross too. And it will take us beyond. We will have to go to that other side where the walls of our own iron-clad knowing crumble. We will be asked to risk appearing foolish by acknowledging that we might be wrong. We will have to loosen our grip on attitudes and ideals long held close. This call to become what we could previously not imagine is indeed radical. We are invited to do what Jesus did and to give ourselves as a 'fragrant offering to God', as Paul says (Ephesians 5:2). Mary Ward did this and her life and work continue to bear fruit today four hundred years later. As she said, "Satisfy yourself with nothing that is less than God". And so, let us ask ourselves that difficult question about collaboration. And as we do that, let's keep in mind the context of all our spiritual questioning and soul-searching, Paul's hope-filled and exciting words:

*Glory be to God whose power, working in us,  
can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine!*

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