

Find your truth in God and live from it

Today, as we remember the birthday of Mother Gonzaga Barry in the confused and disorientated world we are currently in, I am drawn to reflect on the Values of our Loreto Tradition, Values that so clearly informed her life and choices, and especially the one we are celebrating this year, Verity. I think the best way to describe the five Loreto Values we hold dear is to say that these Values are stories about God. They are both a way to God and they are the face of God. I say this because each of these Values is firmly centred in the Gospel. Their particular meaning is drawn from the truths and worldview, the life and words of Jesus, and as we explore them and live them we find that we are taken into the heart of a Gospel-centred life. And how we need that anchor right now.

Verity means Truth. Truth is a multi-faceted thing and indeed in our post-Modern world of relativism and individualism we may question whether there is any such thing as objective truth. Many would say there isn't and that at best, 'truth' is the sense each one makes of the world, life and how best to live. Truth, thus understood, is seen as rather personal - we all know the expression, 'speak your truth'. In fact truth, in this sense, may more properly be thought of as perspectives, often held without sound rational or philosophical argument and often emotionally based. Truth can be a pragmatic and functional thing too - whatever works for you - serving a purpose, helping us find our way through the dizzying array of options life offers us. Getting to the truth of any situation can often be a messy business for these very reasons. Conflicting truths, as we know, can lead to heated arguments, stand-offs, broken relationships, violence. Truth can become a fortress in which we hide. Two extremes seem to characterise much of the approach to truth today. On the one hand, an iron-clad grip on often narrowly defined positions and beliefs, and on the other hand, an attitude which says, 'hold to whatever is good for *you*, whatever feels right for *you* and serves you well'. So, certainly a complex thing!

But Truth, Verity, for Mary Ward, was something very particular and to understand how she saw it and what she meant when she spoke of Verity we need to take a moment to look into the heart of this remarkable woman. Above all, Mary Ward was a woman profoundly in love with God. She was consumed with a passion to give herself entirely to God. "I listened to God's deep dream for me and felt a longing to respond to God's invitation", 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 her sole desire was to give herself completely to God and to do everything for God's glory. This God that Mary so passionately loved is the God revealed in the life and person of Jesus. The face of this God is love, and all that love means - justice, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, humility, peace, kindness, gentleness. Where this God is present, there we will see patience, self-control, generosity, strength, courage. This is the God

in whose image and likeness we have been created, as our Judaeo-Christian creation mythology affirms. We are formed and brought into being with 'God-ness' in us. The 'breath of God' enlivens us. This is the God whose Spirit at work in us turns our thoughts from violence to peace, from conflict to reconciliation, from self-centredness to selflessness, from bitterness to an open heart, from revenge to non-violence, from judgement to understanding.

For Mary Ward, Truth is centred in the Mystery of this God, the God revealed in and through Jesus. The face of God that we see in Jesus is the Truth she held to. It is the profound truth of what gives meaning to our lives. It is the profound truth of who we are. But Mary did more than simply assent to this Truth. She lived and breathed it. It guided her thoughts, it directed her choices. It is this Truth that she pondered daily as she discerned how best to live it, to give it visible shape and form in her own time and place, in the world of seventeenth century England. "How happy a thing it is to love and serve God", she said, and this is just what she set out to do. Mary's strength and courage came from her prayer, her closeness to God: "Go close to Him", she counselled. Mary found her truth in God and lived from it. The path she trod in all things was the way of Jesus.

To get a deeper sense of this it is worth taking a moment to contemplate the beautiful sculpture of Mary we have in our quad.



In this portrayal of Mary there is something serene and yet determined in her eyes; there is both gentleness and strength captured in her face; there is simplicity too, she is dressed simply. She is on a journey, her satchel on her back, wearing those simple and sturdy walking shoes - and we know she walked across the Alps several times in those shoes! She is moving, she has somewhere to be, something to do. She seems committed but not rushed. 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. That holy place is the Truth she sees revealed in and through Jesus.

So here is this woman who today, 400 years on, still inspires us and invites us to walk with her. She invites us along the path she trod into the heart of the Gospel, into the heart of the Mystery of God. We have no assurance that this will be easy. In fact, Mary Ward's life shows us that it will not be without pain and that there will be some very challenging and demanding choices we will have to make. I imagine Mary would have awoken each morning with the joy of God's love and presence in her heart and, on many of those days, with the heaviness and pain of the uncertainties, criticism and significant obstacles she had to face as she brought a new way of religious life for women into her world. But the pilgrim Mary was able to live with the 'not-yet' and the uncertain. She would have known that she had to give birth to the Mystery of God in her time and place, in the situations she faced, and that to do that, just as in physical birth, required a time of gestation, a waiting and nurturing, a labour and a bringing forth. Verity, as we thus come to know it through Mary Ward, is dynamic and alive. It is about the conceiving of possibilities and the profound engagement of these possibilities with the realities around us. Verity comes to life through the promptings of the Holy Spirit and therefore asks of us that we have a listening, willing heart and the humility to let ourselves be stirred, melted, moulded. Verity is not a set of creedal statements, nor is it dogma or narrowly defined concepts to be argued and defended against competing 'truths'. Verity is not a perspective, an emotional response, nor is it that which simply feels good or right for me.

This Truth is a way of life. It is the 'aliveness' we find in John's Gospel where he has Jesus say, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). It is a way of life which will transform us, as St Paul exclaimed, "It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). And as we say no to other ways, and slowly co-operate in this transformation, we will live out the profound truth of who we are – made in God's image, made for goodness, made for love. This is what we mean by integrity and it is why Mary bound integrity so deeply into her understanding of Verity. To achieve this integrity in our lives we have to do something. There are choices we have to make. We have to grapple with the realities of our own lives, and in the big and little choices we make each day, we have to refer all to God, as she said, live in the context of this Mystery, live from it, and give birth to it. Sometimes we may be surprised at where it leads us. The Spirit of God is not subject to our bidding and will not be confined by our ways, although many make a great effort to do just that! We are reminded of this in Jesus' exchange with Nicodemus: "The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). As we give the Spirit free reign in our lives so do we grow into Truth.

Living from this Truth is a lifelong journey and it requires of us that we commit to it and say 'no' to other 'truths' that may call out to us. Mary Oliver, in her wonderful poem, *The Journey*, captures this so beautifully:

“One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice - though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles.

“Mend my life!” each voice cried. But you didn’t stop.

You knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations - though their melancholy was terrible. It was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and stones.

But little by little, as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice, which you slowly recognised as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you could do - determined to save the only life you could save.”

What wisdom! There are indeed many fallen branches and stones along the way - choices we make and situations in our lives over which we may stumble and fall. Often these other perspectives, these other paths, will challenge our foundations and their voices can be quite compelling, offering all sorts of promising roads. These voices may also lead us into uncertainty and self-doubt. I can’t help but think of the criticism Mary and her Sisters received, particularly from the Church she loved so much. They were referred to as ‘mere women’ whose fervour would therefore fail. They were called most disparagingly ‘the galloping girls’, as they were not living an enclosed religious life, a scandal of the day. Mary was excommunicated and imprisoned. But, to use Mary Oliver’s image, she ‘left those voices behind’ and listened to the ‘voice deep within her’. That voice, deep within us all, is the Spirit of God which has been poured out into our heart, as St Paul says, and our task is to follow the prompting of this Spirit. As we do that ‘the stars will begin to burn through the clouds.’

Each of us must recognise and name the stones over which we stumble and the fallen branches across our way. What is it that tugs at our very foundations? A necessary part of the journey into living from the Truth, is to recognise and name those choices, patterns, attitudes, perspectives that lure us away from the way and the life we see in Jesus. What is it that gets in the way of ‘tuning in’ to God and choosing to say yes to this way? What gets in the way of our surrender? Sometimes it may just seem convenient, more socially acceptable, more comfortable or more beneficial to us to follow other ‘truths’. There is some cost for each of us in letting the Holy Spirit blow us into a holy shape! But as we are reminded, “What does it profit you to gain the whole world and to lose your soul?” (Matthew 16:26). It’s an authentic and life-giving place we are invited into. This can often be a psychological and emotional struggle. We have to enter the complexity of who we are with all the competing emotional and psychological tugging that takes place, the rationalization and justification, the mental

conversations we have as we try to convince ourselves of the rightness of other paths. This is the working of our conscience - that deep-felt sense-ability we have to what is right and wrong – and it is here that the Truth centred in the Mystery of God confronts and engages with anything else that calls out to us. It is in the particular realities of each of our lives that this struggle takes place. How do we make our political choices? Are we guided by the truth of the sacredness of all people, of all life? How do we make our economic decisions and evaluate economic structures in our world? Are we guided by the truth of Jesus’ teachings to care for the poor? In our relationships what guides us through conflict? The truth of forgiveness, the truth of kindness and self-control? Often these choices to surrender to the Truth will see us on the outer edges of what society values and affirms. Sometimes we will be on the margins of what our group affirms and find ourselves judged, criticised, misunderstood. Sometimes these choices will be seen as simply foolish. Mary Ward died believing her work was a failure – but here we are today! Jesus himself died a failure in the eyes of many as he refused to listen to other voices, as he continued, in spite of the darkness of suffering and death, to surrender to the God whose voice spoke most deeply to him. As St Paul says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of the world” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

It’s not easy to live Verity! But it is a sure way *to* God and it is surely the way *of* God.

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