



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

This week we continue our reflection on Felicity - a spirituality of deep and lasting joy - as understood and lived by Mary Ward. You may remember that last week we looked at the story of the woman who encountered Jesus at a well and we saw the transformation in her as a result of that encounter. This week I would like to invite you into another story - a film, *Chocolat*. *Chocolat* is a gorgeous film and if you haven't seen it, or perhaps not for some time, I would really encourage you to seek it out. It's delightful, both visually and in its depth of insight into the human heart. And it certainly speaks to us most powerfully about Christian spirituality.

Into the very controlled and ordered village of Lansquenet in France where life has remained unchanged for a hundred years, and where the people live in what is called 'tranquillite', the north wind blows Vianne and her daughter. Vianne is a free-spirited wanderer, who is actually carrying her own burden, we discover, and is not that free at all. However, she arrives in the village with her secret for making the most delicious and irresistible chocolate and sets up a chocolaterie during the Lenten period of abstinence. The film is all about the awakening of life, hopes, dreams and passion, that her tantalizing treats bring about. Everyone in Lansquenet has a story, a secret, a burden, something hurting or binding them, and everyone is set free in some way, including Vianne and her daughter. But the character I want to focus on is the Comte.

The Comte de Renaud is a man who is very pious, austere in his lifestyle, self-denying and who runs the village with an iron fist. He would like to see everyone adopt his own rigorous moral standard and sharpen their moral observances, as he puts it. This is his way to salvation as he understands it. He even has the young village priest, Pere Henri, under his control, and is in the habit of writing his homilies for him each week. But the austerity and self-denial that he practises have left him bereft of joy, alone, living a pretense (he pretends that his wife is on holiday in Italy, but she has actually left him), and desperately trying to endure it all. In his world the gifts and the abundance of life's joys are not for the tasting. And of course he is fighting Vianne and her chocolaterie - to him they are evil. But let's see what happens!

In the scene I want to focus on, it is Holy Saturday night and the Comte, unable to contain his anger any longer, sets off, knife in hand, to break into the chocolaterie to destroy the wonderful display of chocolate creations in the window, ready for the following day's celebration. And of course, in doing this, he hopes to rid the village of Vianne's influence. But in his frenzied slashing of the chocolate figurines, a sliver of chocolate falls onto his lips. He hesitantly licks his lips, tastes the chocolate - and well, that's it! You must



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remember he has been fasting strictly for weeks. One taste is all it takes! The Comte, starved of delight and pleasure, ravenously stuffs his mouth with chocolate in a frenzy equal to his attempt to destroy it. Eventually he collapses, worn out, and falls asleep in the chaos of the smashed chocolate figurines.

The next morning, early on Easter Sunday, the young village priest on his way to the church, passes the shop and to his amazement finds the Comte lying there. He runs to fetch Vianne who helps the Comte up and enables him to make himself presentable for the Easter Sunday Mass.

The scene then moves to the church, to the young priest delivering his Easter homily, this one written himself! And it is here that we find words of real wisdom: “We cannot measure our goodness by what we don’t do”, he says. “It is not what we exclude but what we embrace”. And he goes on to speak of the humanity of Jesus, his compassion, his love for all people, his inclusion of all, his welcome.

It's not about what we exclude ... it's about what we embrace! What Pere Henri was tapping into there is something which has long been a part of our Christian spiritual tradition - a real joy in living! Back in the 2nd century CE, Irenaeus, who was a bishop of the early Church, said, “The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive”! Sadly, over the centuries, that truth was often lost and the quest for holiness did then become a flight from all things earthly and sensual and delightful. I think of that popular Marian prayer which refers to ‘weeping and wailing in this valley of tears’. Now life certainly may be a valley of tears at times, and for some people this is more so than for others. However, it is not the primary stance in life that Christians are invited to take. Fortunately, in recent decades, there has been a move to reclaim a sense of delight and joy in creation and, moreover, to see creation as the place to meet God. This includes the goodness and blessing of meals shared and the sensory delights of taste, sight, sound, touch. It’s fascinating too that when we look at some of the criticism of Jesus by his opponents we find this same attitude to the world of everyday sensual delight. The Pharisees accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton. They were the religious hard-liners of the day, much like the Comte in his little village, adhering to the letter of the law and harshly judging anyone who didn’t do that. And we know Jesus did enjoy a party! His meals with all sorts of people were well known. His table-fellowship, as it is called, was the occasion for the welcome and healing of many who were living at the margins as outcasts of society, as sinners. The Pharisees had a big problem with Jesus’ exuberant welcome of these people and his enjoyment of food and wine.

But let’s have a look at what we can learn from the Comte and what happened to him.



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In all of the Christian spiritual formation writings, both the classics and contemporary writings, there is always the distinction between being *willful* and being *willing*, and in terms of developing a spirituality of joy this understanding is really important. Adrian van Kaam, a well-known Dutch/American priest/psychologist of the twentieth century wrote a lot about this issue. We all perhaps know people who are grimly living out their call to a virtuous life, just like the Comte, gritting their teeth, enduring, self-denying. Self-mortification was a really popular term in Catholic spirituality in the past. Van Kaam refers to this as *willfulness*: hanging on by strength of will. And this is usually the ego hanging on, even if it doesn't look like it at first. Now in contrast, as an authentic spirituality, he invites us into *willingness*. Willingness is about surrendering to the flow of the Spirit. It is about letting the Spirit find a home in us, and then shape us, guide us, lead us. But of course, when we are so busy holding on to what we believe is ultimate and right, we block the Spirit. And the question we have to ask ourselves is this: Just who or what is in control? *My ego, my vision?* Or am I truly becoming a channel of God's Spirit?

This is one of the great dangers in our spiritual journey - that we limit the life of the Spirit. And as we do this, we shut down possibility and change. We humans have a great tendency to want to define the way things are, to define reality, and very often define it according to our limited vision, or the baggage we carry through life, or our inadequacies or fears, and on top of that, often, we claim Divine sanction for all this! I think of my own country - South Africa - during the apartheid years, when apartheid was considered by the Afrikaner government of the day, and by a significant part of the population, to be divinely ordained. And this dreadful belief spread to those who were oppressed too. I remember in 1990 when Nelson Mandela had just been released from imprisonment on Robben Island, speaking to a Black South African woman in her 60s who stated vehemently that it was right that White people have the better jobs, houses and so on - she had been conditioned to believe it was God's will!

Sometimes we need to be uprooted. We need to be forced out of the blinding and limiting convictions we have. Here is another Anthony De Mello story which illustrates this:

"Calamities can bring growth and Enlightenment, said the master. And he explained it thus: Each day a bird would shelter in the withered branches of a tree that stood in the middle of a vast, deserted plain. One day a whirlwind uprooted the tree, forcing the poor bird to fly a hundred miles in search of shelter - till it finally came to a forest of fruit-laden trees. And he concluded: if the withered tree had survived, nothing would have induced the bird to give up its security and fly".

Sometimes we are forced out of our set ways, and what we discover then is that a new and better experience of life awaits us. But sometimes we are called upon to make that choice ourselves, to let go. Ignatius knew this and he cautioned against what he called



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any inordinate attachment. He spoke of the equilibrium which comes from being freed from attachment so that one can be free to live in the gracious life of Christ. Joy may be ours when we learn to see anew, when we recognize our steel-like grip on reality, and when we have the courage to surrender to the Mystery of God, when we let God be God in our lives.

Not always easy for us!

Mary Ward knew this too and she spoke of this willingness to let God be God in this way: "Our happiness, security and progress are not to be in riches, greatness and favour of princes, but in having open and free access to God almighty, from where must come our strength, light and protection". So to truly live in Felicity we need to be open-hearted and courageous, always allowing the Spirit of God to find a home in us. And that may often be a painful journey into looking at ourselves, acknowledging our own iron-clad grip and then letting go - a leap in the dark. St Paul in his beautiful words about the Spirit says: "The fruit of the Spirit is joy"! Whenever we let the Spirit have its way with us, there is joy. And as Mary Ward said: "What disturbs me inwardly and makes me troubled does not come from God, for the spirit of God always brings with it freedom and great peace". When we find ourselves gritting our teeth in grim determination we can be sure we have wandered far from peace, far from joy.

Let's just return for a moment to that image of the Comte in the chocolate, desperately stuffing his mouth. Beyond the initial humour perhaps, it's a very moving scene really in terms of the utter relief and release it expresses: 'Look what I've been missing!' is its heart-rending cry. And as I said, the young priest expressed it so simply and powerfully: it is not what we exclude, it is what we embrace. The scene of the Comte stuffing his mouth with chocolate is very much like that of the woman of Samaria sitting on the ledge of the well, finally putting the cup of water to her mouth and drinking thirstily. Both were thirsty.

One taste is all it takes!

Almost sixteen hundred years ago, Augustine of Hippo wrote of the profound, ecstatic joy of tasting God, of being grasped by God and being pulled out of his limited perspective, out of his willfulness, into a willingness, into surrender: "I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! You were with me but I was not with you. You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace" (Confessions of St Augustine Book X). I think those words are equally applicable to Mary



Ward too: You touched me, and I am enflamed with love of your peace! And it's where we are invited.

As you will see in the diagram below, Adrian Van Kaam expresses it in the following way, and I think this really captures just what is needed to live the way of Felicity. This is how Mary Ward would have understood and expressed it too. We are called upon to let God, the Ground and Source of all, shape and form, guide and inspire all aspects of our self: let God shape our values (what Van Kaam calls our core self), our culture and lifestyle (what he calls our apparent self), and who we are, what we do and how we are right now (what he calls our current self). We are called upon to let all these aspects of our self become transparent to the Mystery of God. This is the open-heartedness that Mary Ward saw as a characteristic of Felicity. And this open-heartedness to God will be the source of our open-heartedness to others, to life itself.

My Current Self: who I am right now, my day to day life



My Apparent Self: my cultural values and lifestyle



My Core Self: my personal values and ideals



Ground of Being, Source of all: God

We have a very powerful paradigm for this right at the heart of our Christian story: the cross. And now we have begun the season of Lent it is worth pondering this. In the image of the crucified Christ, arms opened wide, we see complete and utter self-giving. But not without a struggle. In the Garden of Gethsemane, or the Mount of Olives, the night before he died, Jesus struggled. Emerging from the Upper Room after the meal with his disciples who were probably all a little tipsy, and faced with a deep sense that he was in danger, he could have run away, through the Kidron Valley and out into the desert night. But he chose not to. He remained there. And that account of the prayer of Jesus that night in the garden presents us with one of the most profoundly human experiences: he entered into



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a state of extreme anxiety, he pleaded with God to take this away from him: “If it be possible take this cup away from me”. And in one of the Gospel accounts we are told he sweated drops of blood. Now today we know that when people are in a state of profound anxiety, little capillaries may burst and lead to what indeed appears to be sweating blood. But Jesus did not remain there. He emerged from this struggle by surrendering himself to what had always been the source of life for him: “Nevertheless not what I want, but what you want”. And again on the cross, in the midst of a feeling of abandonment, the model we have is surrender: “Into your hands I commit my spirit”.

There are many ways of looking at the cross and letting it speak to us and touch us - and yes, it does speak of suffering. But for me the most profound story of the cross is the utter giving of the self to God that it invites us into. And resurrection is the ultimate ‘yes’ of Life to us, the ‘yes’ of God to us! In religious language we call it the Paschal Mystery.

So the cross tells a very powerful story of Felicity. We could well say that the cross is the symbol of Felicity! The movement from darkness, to surrender, to life. And this is what Mary Ward’s way of Felicity calls us to. It is then that we will be able to be generous, light-hearted, hope-filled, optimistic, positive, cheerful and open-hearted.

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