

Address celebrating the Mary Ward 400 Jubilee Saturday 23 January 2010

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, gave the following address after the Distribution of Holy Communion at a Mass to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of beginnings of the sisters of the Venerable Mary Ward (the Congregation of Jesus, and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary), in Westminster Cathedral.

The service was part of 'Venerable Mary Ward: Jubilee 400'

The Church comes together in the Eucharist to discover once again what it really is and to be renewed in that discovery. And it discovers again and again—day by day and century by century—that what it is, is something very simple. It is the assembly of people contemporary with Jesus Christ: people made alive in their communion with him. Day by day and century by century, the Church is tempted to believe that it is something a great deal more complicated. It loves to run away from the simplicity of that encounter with Christ. And yet there at the heart of everything is that fundamental fact than which nothing is deeper and nothing is truer: we are those made alive in communion with Jesus. And we express it in the supreme simplicity of a physical action. We eat the bread of life and we take into our bodies the very being of that 'friend of friends' who is Jesus Christ.

And throughout the long centuries of the Church's history renewal has always had about it that element of eucharistic simplicity; that element of the rediscovery of who we are as church simply in the transparency of certain people to the living Jesus. In the fourth Christian century when the Church was beginning to be tangled in the politics of the Roman Empire, and tangled in its own language and ideas, the Desert Fathers and Mothers returned to a simplicity of being contemporary with Jesus that changed the face of Christianity for ever after. In the Middle Ages—the Church once again tangled in international politics compromised by crusading—Francis of Assisi arose as a sign of eucharistic simplicity and renewal in communion with the living Jesus. In the age of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation when, as St Teresa of Avila said, the world seemed to be on fire, the Church was renewed again – in the simplicity of Teresa herself, of Ignatius (and I dare to say of one or two people deeply disapproved of by Teresa and Ignatius also!) And in the life of Mary Ward it is exactly that same eucharistic simplicity that once again arises as a gift for the Church's renewal.

In an age of complexity and crisis when the identity of Christendom seems to be under threat, an age when the flames seem to be burning fast and the landmarks are no longer stable, how very tempting it is to take refuge in the complicated, to build with greater and greater elaboration the walls of self-defence: and how very difficult it is to be simple. The Church of Mary Ward's day didn't really know what to do with her. It preferred the complications of what people already understood about discipleship and the religious life and particularly the religious life for women. But Mary Ward raised up in the Church of her day a sign of eucharistic simplicity: verity, sincerity, transparency.

In a time of crisis and uncertainty what we need is simple transparency to the contemporary Jesus. Transparency: it reminds me of the one piece of actual connection between Mary Ward and the archbishopric of Canterbury (in case you were wondering). The archbishop of the day had made some quite pointed remarks about how dangerous a woman she was. (There was indeed you might say, a level of ecumenical consensus about what a problem she was in her time!) But being the holy person she was, she was not going to be intimidated by an archbishop of Canterbury any more than by a pope. She decided she would visit Lambeth Palace with some of her sisters. She did so, and the Archbishop was out. But she left her mark. She scratched her name on a windowpane. Whatever else that story says, it says something about holiness and simplicity; about the saints as those whose names are simply scratched on a windowpane against the overwhelming light of the living Jesus. We cannot look at them and read their names without seeing that light. And that light comes to us through the saints, illuminating those names, those faces, those histories.

We know that the living Jesus continues to work in his saints that eucharistic miracle of simplicity. And we, the divided and confused Christian churches, pray for that gift of renewing simplicity day by day, and year by year. We pray that the light of the living Jesus will again give life to the Church, to the religious life, to the institutional life, the political life (we might even say) of our organizations and our communities. Knowing—wryly and sadly—that the more we think about the 'renewal of the Church', and the 'renewal of the religious life', and the less we think about the eucharistic simplicity of Jesus, so the less easily we shall be renewed. The verity and simplicity that were at the heart of Mary Ward's apostolate, the longing to be transparent was not simply a virtue confined to Yorkshire women. It was and is a virtue of Christian women and Christian men and Christian children. We want to be what we see; we want to be what we say; we want the God whose words are works, to be at work and speaking in our lives as the Word Incarnate lives, speaks and transfigures us in the bread of the Lord's Supper.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.