

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY SERMON 18.10.09

Preached by Dr Gemma Simmonds CJ

At Great St Mary's Church, Cambridge

18th October 2009

Reading Luke 10.1-9

*Hymns I heard the Voice of Jesus Say
Who would True Valour See*

Four hundred years ago, at the time when the university of Cambridge was celebrating its fourth centenary, a Yorkshirewoman called Mary Ward was initiating a quiet revolution in the history of the Catholic church, & of women's education by founding an unenclosed order of women on the Jesuit model. Condemned to death by the English state for recusancy, she went on to be imprisoned for heresy by her own church for daring to challenge the prevailing rules on women's suitability for apostolic ministry within the world. Her conviction that God was calling women to do great things was based on an understanding of women's capacity to comprehend God which flew in the face of the theology and anthropology of her time.

In the fourth of a series of paintings by Julie Daniels, commemorating the University's eighth centenary, we see glimpses of the religious upheavals that formed the backdrop to Mary Ward's young life.¹ Three books that feature are the Book of Common Prayer, a philosophical text acquired by Queen's Astrologer John Dee from the dissolution of the monasteries and Osorio's *De nobilitate*, dedicated to Cardinal Reginald Pole, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Marian Restoration. Learning both ancient and new was brought to bear in the struggle for the minds and souls of the century, while at the level of prayer new forms of expression were sought to give voice to those who urged that God should be worshipped 'on this mountain' or 'in Jerusalem'.² In the same picture we see the instruments of the emerging new sciences, so eagerly pursued by Jesuit scholars, and to which Mary Ward and her followers sought access for women as they pushed back frontiers theological, social and educational. In Daniels' painting of the seventeenth century we move to the scientific and mathematical discoveries of the age, along with the Authorised Version of the Bible, reminding us of the unbreakable link perceived by Newton between science and faith.

The bitter opposition within her own church to Mary Ward's pioneering vision for women stemmed from a conviction that women did not know how to do good except to themselves.³ What was needed was an entirely new understanding of how men and women are created, how they understand and relate to God, both distinctly and together. The church of Mary's time had to come to realise how it might be part of the unfolding of God's purpose in the world that social relations between the genders might change, and gender-related stereotypes affecting access to knowledge might need to be overturned altogether. For Mary it was not a matter of

¹ <http://www.octagon-8.com/paintings.htm>

² John 4: 19-24

³ Christina Kenworthy Browne, ed., *Mary Ward 1585-1645, A Brief Relation: with Autobiographical Fragments and a Selection of Letters* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), p.122

gender war, or of a struggle for supremacy, but of the truth itself. Her own writings put it in blunt, Yorkshire fashion,

‘There was a father that lately came into England whom I heard say, that he would not for 10,000 of worlds be a woman, because he thought a woman could not apprehend God: I answered nothing but only smiled, although I could have answered him by the experience I have of the contrary: I could have been sorry for his want of judgment, I mean not [...] to condemn his judgment, for he is a man of a very good judgment; his want is in experience’.⁴

What made Mary remarkable was her understanding, so far in advance of her time, of the essential equality of men and women created in God’s image and likeness, beyond any category imposed by society and tradition. There were so many voices in her time which spoke of women in derogatory terms, reminding them of their mental, physical and moral inferiority. She questioned the very basis of these opinions, even when legitimized by theology and ecclesial authority,

‘I confess wives are to be subject to their husbands, men are head of the church, women are not to administer sacraments, nor to preach in public churches, but in all other things wherein are we so inferior to other creatures, that they should term us but women [...] as if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man, which I dare be bold to say is a lie, and with respect to the good father, may say it is an error’.⁵

In pioneering women’s education and a theological understanding of the equality of women and men before God, Mary Ward was an important part of the historical momentum which led to the changes that have made it possible for this woman and many others to preach in public churches and to find a voice which has enabled them to make outstanding contributions to the history of education, including in this University. In an age where disputes about divine and ecclesial truth were settled in deadly fashion, Mary urged her sisters to love and live in ‘verity’ - the truth of God which transcends all social categories.

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman referred to in our first hymn is one in which social, gender and religious stereotypes, along with preconceived notions of truth, worship and salvation are also overturned. The woman comes from a tribal and religious tradition founded by that most unlikely of prophetic religious figures, the conniving, wheeler-dealing bandit visionary Jacob. It was Jacob who found himself engaged in a wrestling match with an angel, seeking an answer to the question of who God is, only to find himself given a new identity instead.

The Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye wrote in his notebook:

‘All reading begins in the revolt against narcissism:
when a book stops reflecting your own prejudices,

⁴ Ursula Dirmeier, *Mary Ward und ihre Gründung: die Quellentexte bis 1645* (Münster, Aschendorf, 2007), p.359 [spelling modernized].

⁵ *Ibid*, pp.364-5 [spelling modernized]

whether for or against your own prejudices,
 whether for or against what you think you 'see in it'
 and begins to say something close to what it does say,
 the core of reality [in the 'objective' aspect of it] takes shape
 and you start wrestling with an angel.'

The Samaritan woman finds herself wrestling not with an angel but with a wisdom which comes from an unexpected source, in unlikely guise. Her prejudices are overcome by the freedom with which this Jewish rabbi oversets those of his own culture. It is a freedom in pursuit of the truth which bears fruit in liberation and love. In his recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI, himself a past pupil of a Mary Ward school, and therefore the recipient of an excellent education, speaks of this correlation between truth and love, and of the Christian vocation to bear witness to truth,

'To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are [...] exacting and indispensable forms of charity [...] This is a matter of no small account today, in a social and cultural context which relativizes truth, often paying little heed to it and showing increasing reluctance to acknowledge its existence.'⁶

He echoes Northrop Frye, saying,

'Truth, by enabling men and women to let go of their subjective opinions and impressions, allows them to move beyond cultural and historical limitations and to come together in the assessment of the value and substance of things [...] Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love.'⁷

The University of Cambridge is celebrating eight hundred years of seeking the truth. Mary Ward's followers are celebrating four hundred years of the greater inclusion within that pursuit of women's minds and voices and experience, enriching the overall understanding of what it means to be a human being, part of human society before God. It has been my greatest joy and privilege to be a member of two colleges here in Cambridge, Newnham and St. Edmund's, which reflect the enrichment brought to the University and to the pursuit of truth by the voices of women and the Catholic spiritual and intellectual tradition.

But celebration does not give us permission to be complacent. Mary Ward's struggle to change the mindset of her time included pilgrim journeys on foot to Rome across the Alps over three thousand miles through warring armies and bubonic plague. We must also expect to make some difficult journeys. Jesus challenges his disciples to go out on the road with no defences, no security, receiving only what is offered them. He challenges the woman of Samaria to open her mind and heart to a way of worshipping God that is not limited to Mount Gerizim or to Jerusalem but which is done in Spirit and truth. Pope Benedict reminds us that this truth can only be received as a gift. It is this gift which enables us to override the habits and prejudices

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 1, 2

⁷ Ibid, 3,52

of our own minds, the dictates of prevailing culture and the complacency into which we fall when we only think and hear and read what confirms our own ideas and opinions. Truth, though received as a gift, can also be received as a painful challenge, upsetting our comfortable equilibrium and stretching our horizons to breaking point.

It is not enough for Christians called to the vocation of learning to retreat into devotion and philanthropy, however admirable they might be. We are called to engage in the struggle to make sense of a world in a constant and increasingly rapid state of change. The living water of grace and truth offered by Christ is not a drink for the faint-hearted, but it is what makes it possible for us to wrestle with the angel of truth in love. Mary Ward came to know that God had made women capable of more than society and the church acknowledged. She received a vision of what she called a 'just soul' that is characterized by a confidence and transparency which makes it possible for us to 'be such as we appear, and appear such as we are', without fear or disguise. She saw this state as a return to humanity's original justice, sincerity and innocence. She understood it as particularly given to her sisters as women, since they had been deprived, by reason of gender, of the opportunities for learning and wisdom given to men. Through this freedom, justice and sincerity, she says, 'we should gain at God's hand true wisdom'.⁸ It is this same wisdom and self-understanding that Jesus offers the woman at the well. In an extended instruction on knowledge and truth, Mary Ward reflects on how women are to attain perfection.

'By learning? No, though learning be a good means, because it giveth knowledge. Yet you see many learned men who are not perfect because they practise not what they know, nor perform what they preach. But to attain perfection, knowledge of verity is necessary, to love it and effect it [...] note well wherefore you are to seek this knowledge. Not for the content and satisfaction it bringeth, though it be exceeding great, but for the end it bringeth you to, which is God'.⁹

So knowledge and learning are always inextricably linked to a relationship of love and worship of God in Spirit and truth. A vital element of the Christian vision of human flourishing consists in the rediscovery of God's original plan for what it is to be human. Union with God and the vocation to human flourishing are not about becoming superhuman but about entering more fully into what being human means. This lies at the heart of the Incarnation. So, my question to you is: what do you know, at your deepest core? What is the knowledge on which you have based your life, for which you might be prepared to spend your life? What is the knowledge that brings not just content and satisfaction but a closer encounter with and understanding of the end it brings you to, which is God?

In his recent book *God, Philosophy, Universities*, Alisdair MacIntyre warns against the submission of a concept of knowledge or truth to the overriding principle of socio-economic expectation. Where this becomes the goal, rather than independence of mind, education degenerates into social engineering. Rather than fitting students for a particular profession or

⁸ Dirmeier 1, pp. 290-291 (spelling modernized).

⁹ Gillian Orchard, *Till God Will: Mary Ward through her Writings* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1985), p.59

career, the aim of education is to transform minds, so that the student becomes a different kind of individual, capable of exercising judgement and of bringing insights and arguments from a variety of disciplines to bear on particular complex issues.¹⁰ In the same way Pope Benedict warns against the increasing gap between knowledge, development and justice, in terms of universal human flourishing.¹¹ When learning and knowledge become the means of access to privilege for the few, education becomes just one more instrument of social injustice and human disintegration.

Eight hundred years ago, the University of Cambridge began its tradition of excellence in pursuit of truth. Four hundred years later, Mary Ward broke the dumb silencing of women by bringing women's voice and women's experience to bear on that same pursuit of truth. Whose voice is currently silent in the conversation about knowledge and truth? In some circles it is the voice of conscience, a voice that says that truth is not relative, but comes as a gift from God, leading to God and to the fullness of human flourishing by enabling all humanity to share in the vision of God. It is a voice that calls all seekers after truth to find God not on this mountain or in the Jerusalem of their own fixed mindsets, but in the freedom of the Spirit.

The other voice which is notably silent in the world's debates about truth and knowledge is the voice of the poor, the dispossessed, whose wisdom and understanding of what it is to be human are ignored and whose urgent cry for justice is systematically disregarded as we fix our goal on preserving our own security and privilege at their expense. When he sent his disciples out on their mission, Jesus sent them out to be poor among the poor, to be receivers as well as givers, learners as well as teachers. When he sat down by the well in Samaria, he made a choice to enter into the space of the despised other and to receive what that other would give. The poor are the unheard, disregarded 'other' within the worldwide conversation in pursuit of truth. They are in it not just as passive receivers of assistance from the philanthropy of developed peoples. They are in the conversation because they speak with a wisdom of experience that is denied those whose minds and hearts are cushioned and dulled by affluence. Eight hundred years on from the arrival of students in Cambridge, seeking wisdom, four hundred years on from the pioneering struggle of Mary Ward to include the voice of the voiceless in that pursuit, we have still to hear and take to heart and act on the cry of the poor as it calls us to a deeper knowledge that can only be encountered in Spirit and truth.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: a Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*, (London, Continuum, 1990), pp. 147-8

¹¹ *Caritas in Veritate*, 1, 18-19.