Some connections to today:

- Mary’s sense that all things can bring us back to God is echoed in *Laudato Si*. This mystical sense of God in all and through all calls for new awareness of this earth as our common home.

- Freedom, Justice, Sincerity are not three separate gifts, but interrelated and dynamic, rather Trinitarian. How might they lead us to new ways of allowing God to work in our hearts?

- How do these gifts of freedom, justice and sincerity relate to the vows which shape our lives?

- What do they ask of us in our dealings with each other, day by day in community?

- What contribution might they make to church and society today?

- How do I thank God for having these gifts as the ground of our charism?
The Just Soul: a charism given to Mary Ward and to us

Context: The Just Soul experience cannot be looked at on its own. It grows out of Mary Ward’s earlier experiences, drawing her from the enclosed life, urging her towards the Magis—something more for the Glory of God. The experience of her small group, ministering underground and in education, led to her moment of blinding clarity when she realised her small group could find coherence and direction using the same rule as the Jesuits. We know this led to a brick wall of resistance. Some of this resistance could be recognised as a dismissal of them as “but women” but underlying this prejudice was an undisputable fact: Jesuits, as men, had access to theological education that was beyond the reach of women.

Mary’s Jesuit confessor, whom she had vowed to obey, had drawn up a short rule for her group. However, in allowing them to be active, it limited them to being a pious association and showed no similarity to the Jesuit Constitution. Obviously in earlier conversations with him Mary had explained the clarity of her “Take the Same” experience. But societal and ecclesial limitations on women blocked the way. Henrietta Peters suggests that in this period Mary took herself to England on mission a few times, perhaps as a way of dealing with this stalemate with Fr Roger Lee, whom she respected and loved, but who faced pressures from his congregation not to involve himself in the affairs of this group of women.

Mary went on retreat at the end of November 1615. Uppermost in her mind would have been how to reconcile her conviction from her mystical experience “Take the Same of the Society..”, which was being affirmed in the practical experience of her group, with the arguments given her by serious and caring advisers. This tension explains her concern at the beginning of her letter to Roger Lee. She wants to share with him her insights into the graces that God is pouring out on

She returns to her concern that Fr Roger Lee might dismiss what she is saying, yet trusts that her obedience to him is of God, so she seems to have peace that all will be well. She turns over these virtues in her mind: why would these have emerged as so critical for her group? She realises that the Fathers of the Society have such learning, that they could come to trust their learning rather than God’s grace, so they also need to be vigilant in their “referring all to God”. But women, even without the learning, can be open to receive true wisdom from God’s hands, ready to perform whatever is asked of us. In her Verity speeches she will mull over the difference between learning and knowledge, valuing both, but seeing true knowledge as a sharing in God who is Verity.

She returns to the relationship of the first parents, at home with God in friendship and mutual trust, as a fountain which resources her again and again as “the best disposition” for a person to be in.

Mary had a strong sense of her failures to “be good”, to fully respond to God’s grace. She returns to this and asks Father Roger to pray for her. A letter to him a month later (which maybe he never received because he died close to the time it was sent) shows even more strongly Mary’s concern to not let her own will drive her actions, but to discern with him her spiritual experiences. “God is wise, whose holy will be ever done.”

One example of how this Just Soul insight influenced Mary’s later thinking is found in a few sentences at the end of the official record written after the death of Barbara Ward, Mary’s much loved sister. While the main part was written by another companion, a few sentences towards the end have the ring of Mary Ward’s own writing, commending Barbara as a Just Soul:

“Here are no miracles, yet true and solid virtue, worthy the imitation; no raps [raptures], yet a most straight union with God at all times; no revelations, yet a true knowledge of God and her self; no visions, yet she had God always present before her eyes, who is the true object of all pure souls...”
women who join this way. God’s gifts will support women in this life. Their lack of formal theological education was not an insurmountable barrier. But she fears that she will upset him by continuing to argue her case.

Take a few moments to recall for yourself Mary’s spiritual journey and changing understanding of holiness. From believing that holiness meant ‘leaving the world’, choosing the most enclosed way, she had moved to asking for a rule that did not require enclosure. From believing that women could do nothing for others, she had experienced that women can serve the spiritual welfare of others as an integral part of their call to Religious Life. This letter describes this process culminating in a clarity about holiness being other than she had once believed, being a total gift from God, and being given to women to enable them to do whatever this call might ask of them. This mystical experience was seminal for her. Her conviction that women can live this life finds fuller expression in the “verity speeches” two years later, and one finds echoes of her insights about the Just Soul in her spiritual notes over the coming years.

Over the page, read the full version of the Just Soul. [Many (like the one in our Volume II Constitutions) leave out the key sentences about men and women’s different access to education, perhaps because this is no longer the case, but I think they provide the key to why she writes this letter.]

Breaking it open:

- Allow yourself to catch a little of her wonder and excitement. This insight was breath-taking for her. A person could be caught by God into a holiness that was not characterised by distance from the world, but being in the world and yet grounded in God.

- Explore the link between freedom, friendship and easy access to God, exemplified in “walking with God in Paradise”, nothing blocking full openness and the ability to allow all creation to bring us to God. This is God’s invitation to her, drawing her towards the joy that comes with such trust and openness. In her Verity speeches later she will talk more to her companions about the importance of affection, but also the importance of not being dependent on others for their affection: being free to bring all to God, to make God our reference point.

- Justice flows out of this right relationship with God, and flows into an apt disposition for all good works, works of justice. She recognises what Just persons (including women) have done through history.

- She sees that to have such a freedom with God and readiness for all good works, a deep and abiding honesty with oneself, with God and with others is needed.

- These three interlocking gifts of freedom, justice and sincerity lead to a particular happiness, felicity, and are utterly needful.
Dearest Father,

I would exceeding gladly for my better satisfaction and greater security, acquaint you with what hath occurred in these two days especially that which yesterday I wrote to your Reverence about, and going now to set it down, the better I discern it, the less able I find myself to declare it. I seem to love it, and yet am afflicted in it because I cannot choose but retain it, and yet dare not embrace it for truly good till it be approved.

It seems a certain clear and perfect estate, to be had in this life, and such an one as is altogether needful for those that should well discharge the duties of this Institute. I never read of any I can compare in likeness to it; yet it is not like the state of Saints, whose holiness chiefly appears in that union with God, which maketh them out of themselves. I perceived then an apparent difference, and yet felt myself drawn to love and desire this estate, more than all those favours. The felicity of this estate (for as much as I can express) was a singular freedom from all that could make one adhere to earthly things, with an entire application and apt disposition to all good works. Something happened also discovering the freedom that such soul should have had to refer all to God, but I think that was after, or upon some other occasion; howsoever that such a thing there was I am very certain.

I seemed in my understanding to see a soul thus composed, but far more fair than I can express it. It then occurred, and so still continues in my mind, that those in Paradise, before the first fall, were in this estate. It seemed to me then and that hope remains still, that Our Lord let me see it to invite me that way and because He would give me grace in time to arrive to such an estate, at least in some degree.

That word justice, and those in former times that were called just persons, works of justice, done in innocence, and that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are, those things often since occurred to my mind with a liking of them. And that you may know all and judge according (though several times since I began to write, I have found an extraordinary horror in myself, and with all a fear that you would see it all to be nought, and be much afflicted at it) but howsoever, blessed be Our Lord, who hath provided me of such, as can tell me what is good.

I have moreover thought upon this occasion, that perhaps this course of ours would continue till the end of the world because it came to that in which we first began. Once I found a questioning in myself why this state of justice, and virtue of sincerity should appear unto me so especially requisite as a ground of all those other virtues necessary to be exercised by those of the Institute, and it occurred, that the fathers of the Society, being men, wise and learned; they might by those their natural parts perform the functions of this Institute without so special concurrence of God’s grace, as might require their constant vigilance and care, in the practice of these above said virtues, and therefore if anything should be in danger to decay amongst them it might be this. [ ] As also that we, wanting that learning, judgement and other parts that men have, yet being grounded in this we should gain at God’s hands true wisdom, and ability to perform all such other things as the perfection of this Institute exacts of us.

After both that day, and the next as my meditations further discovered the condition of this Institute, me thought I better understood those particulars one, by one, practically, not confusedly, than ever before I had done; they led me severally to that first estate, as the fountain, and best disposition for a soul to be in, that could perform all this well, and from thence I could without labour return to them again, and discern with great clearness and solid tranquility the excellency, and convenience of them. So as a great part of these two days has been exceeding pleasing, and I hope profitable, for I end with desires to be good (which I see I am not, and without that, it seems impossible I should be able to do good, as least according to the estate of life, whereunto I think I am called, for my will is so exceeding stubborn and perverse, as that if will not let me possess any good with certainty or without fear to lose it again. And how much this indisposition, for God’s favour doth hinder me, in a, I can better perceive in myself that show to those I should. I humbly beseech you obtain my amendment of God, and help me to be good, how dear soever it cost. Bestow on us all your blessing.

Your ever unworthy M[ar]y W[ard]  

Upon All Saints Day 1615 which was on a Sunday.