

The Just Soul – the Mary Ward model of holiness – Jane Livesey CJ

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On the feast of All Saints, 1 November 1615, (exactly 400 years ago next year) Mary Ward wrote one of the most important and significant letters in a life in which many many letters were written. At that point she was almost exactly halfway through her life, with a past in which she had already taken several different turnings in order to be faithful to what she understood to be the will of God, and with a future that it was perhaps a blessing she could not, at that point, see, since it too was a stony path in the following of His will.

In this letter Mary shared with her confessor, Fr Roger Lee, an insight she had been given, which was to shape both her own life and that of “those who should well discharge the duties of this Institute” – **and**, I am going to suggest today, those that should well discharge their Christian vocation, whether in this Institute or in the lay vocation which is yours. It came to be known as the “Just Soul” and is for me the heart of our vocation – yours and mine - as her followers and “companions in the Lord” in trying to be faithful to her particular understanding of what it means to be a “just soul” – to be holy.

In my words this morning I would like to share with you both the Just Soul itself, as she recounted it to Fr Roger Lee but also what are generally agreed to be its three principal components – components which are by no means reserved to those in religious life but which, I think, are equally applicable to those of you living the lay life, but wishing to do so in true companionship with your God and Lord.

I would imagine many people here have heard the words the “Just Soul” – could you please raise your hand if you are not familiar with the phrase. If there are any CJs who raise their hands they should come and have a word with me later!

The Just Soul was the third of what we have come to see as the three key “graces” or “understandings” (words I prefer to vision) of Mary Ward. The first, in 1609, had brought her clarity about what was not to be her way of life – that of an enclosed Poor Clare sister. It is typical of her down-to-earthness that she was not doing anything very overtly spiritual at the time she had this understanding – but sitting in front of the mirror brushing her hair. Now that really is finding God in all things! In terms of what was to be her way of life this “Glory” vision or understanding had given her no clear picture. She simply understood that “*some other thing I was to do, what or of what nature I did not see, nor could I guess, only that it was to be a good thing and what God willed*”. We know this because that is what she herself wrote in her Autobiography.

She was given a very clear indication, not of what she was to do, but of the value of it. And here is one of her first lessons for us as people of the 21st century. She understood this because she was listening with the ears of her heart and she had cultivated that attentiveness that means you don't miss things – or at least not everything - that you don't spend time later on thinking “If only - if only I'd listened, if only I'd noticed, if only I'd paid more attention...”. The world we live in doesn't encourage that kind of attentiveness – we're always in a rush and we've got too much to do. But without attentiveness, to God and to others, we will never be able to become the people God has it in mind for us to become.

It was to be another two years before she received any further clarification from God of the way forward. In the meantime she had left the Poor Clares, returned to England, gathered some companions and gone back with them to St Omer, where they bought a house and began to teach. As some of you may know, that house still exists and now has a plaque commemorating Mary Ward. All during the period 1609 to 1611 she and her companions were praying to know the will of God – and in 1611 He answered their prayers and she had the second of her key understandings – what we call the “Take the same of the Society”. She understood absolutely clearly and without any doubt that her group of companions and she must form an Institute based on the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, just as their spiritual lives were rooted in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.

As she put it in a later letter (1619) to Fr John Gerard, a very well-known English Jesuit of the time - ***“These words gave light where there was none, made known what God would have done, gave assurance of what is wished for in time to come. And if ever I be worthy to do anything more about the Institute, hither I must come to draw”***.

And so began a period of founding houses and schools, and, at the same time, beginning the work of writing the first plan of the Institute, which was taken to Rome in late 1615. As you all know, neither that or the two subsequent plans for her Institute were accepted by Rome and eventually in 1631 the Institute was suppressed, Mary Ward herself condemned as a heretic and imprisoned and her numerous schools and houses across Europe closed. She suffered from chronic ill-health throughout her life and this only got worse during those years, as she watched the collapse of all that she had done in the earlier years. Yet, although remaining loyal to the Church she loved but which simply did not understand her, she never yielded in her conviction that what she had done was what God wanted of her.

And for me it is the third and final of the key graces, the Just Soul, that sheds the greatest light on how she managed to remain firm in her commitment to what she believed to be God's will throughout the many years of spiritual and psychological exile until her death outside York in England in 1645.

As I said, she had this understanding of what a Just Soul might be when she was 30, halfway through her life. By then she had much life experience, most of it very demanding, and also a clear sense of her own identity before God. So now, having told you a little of the background and context of the Just Soul, it seems the right moment for us to listen to her sharing her understanding of this Just Soul with Fr Roger Lee in her letter to him.

“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... It is not like the state of saints, whose holiness chiefly appears in that union with God which maketh them out of themselves...”

The felicity of this estate...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 a soul should have...to refer all to God...

That word Justice, and those in former times that were called just persons, works of justice, done in innocency...

That we be such as we appear and appear such as we are...

These things often since occurred to my mind with a liking of them...”

One of the clues to the kind of holiness Mary Ward is talking about comes in that very first section when she says that this state of holiness is not one associated with extreme mystical graces – the kind that take a person “out of themselves” – in ecstasies or visions. And as she speaks more about what she understood it is clear that this kind of holiness is rooted in the ordinary and the everyday and how we conduct ourselves in our everyday life. In 1617, when giving a conference to her sisters, she was to emphasise that point again when she said that

“...Many think it is nothing to do ordinary things. But for us it is: to do ordinary things well...”

So the first point to make about the Mary Ward model of holiness is that it is found in the ordinary and is beyond the grasp of none of us. This is a very clear example of how she has been formed by the Spiritual Exercises and St Ignatius and has appropriated for herself his principle of “finding God in all things”.

I would like to highlight three key phrases in the Just Soul, each associated with a particular virtue and I would like to speak a little about each of these three key virtues in turn – the virtues of: freedom but a particular freedom – that of referring all to God, being in right relationship with him; that of justice – being in right relationship with other people, whether near or far, and perhaps in our own times we would also add of being in right relationship with our world and with creation; and that of sincerity - being in right relationship with ourselves: being such as we appear and appearing such as we are, which again we might translate as transparency (at least in English, I am not certain if it translates like that into Spanish).

Having done that I will end with what for me is one of the most important aspects of any model of holiness – how we deal with the f-word. I will tell you what the “f” stands for when we get there – but it is certainly the usual f-word in English!

So let us turn first to freedom.

As I said, Mary Ward’s freedom is a very distinct one. It is the freedom that allows us to refer all to God and is the first of the “right relationships” that characterise this way of being holy or living one’s vocation. Meister Eckhart, a Flemish mystic who lived from 1260 to 1328, once said that “God is always at home; it is we who have gone out for a walk”. Well, it is when we have “gone out for a walk” that we lose the freedom to refer all to God. This is a freedom that does not limit encounter to God to some special or “holy” space – for example Mass in church on Sundays - but is open to the encounter with Him each and every day and which takes to Him all aspects of our lives and is attentive to what He might have to say about them. It is a freedom that she goes on to say gives us “an apt disposition for all good works” – that opens us to others as well as to God and gives us an increased awareness that, as St James says, reminds us that we cannot say we love God whom we cannot see, when we do not love and serve our brother or sister whom we can see.

Which leads us to justice.

This justice is the justice of what she calls “innocency”, which is a clear reference to the time before the first instance of human sinfulness – that of Adam and Eve in the Garden – to the time when they, and we, were “innocent”. At that point there was almost no need to have the word “justice” because all words and actions were “just” – humanity was created by God knowing no other way to be than His way – a just way, treating all with respect and dignity on the basis that all are created equal in His sight. Now, however, with the mark of original sin on us all, we need to know about justice because we need to live in a way that is consciously “just”, taking account of our inherent human frailty and weakness and choosing to live in a different way – a just way.

Such a way may require of some of us the willingness to take public actions to advocate the rights of our poor and marginalized brothers and sisters – it is clear that Pope Francis knows that that is what it requires of him. For others, the realm of justice may be our workplace or our school or our home or our community – or, a combination of a number of these. Is there bullying in any of the spheres in which we live or work? Is there an unwillingness to forgive? Is there a resistance to reconciliation?

Because if there is then the justice that Mary Ward is talking about is absent. If, however, we treat all our work colleagues, whether senior or junior to us, all those in our schools from the Headteacher to the cleaning ladies, all those in our families from the youngest to the eldest, with the respect which is due to them as children of God, then the justice Mary Ward is talking about is present. In the same way, if we treat the created world with respect, if we do not plunder it for our own needs – both individually and collectively – then I would argue that that is another sphere in which her “justice” is present and that the way we, as 21st century “friends of Mary Ward, relate to creation and its integrity is a further aspect of living as a “just soul”.

So, finally of the three characteristic virtues of the Just Soul, to sincerity or integrity (I think either word sums up this virtue).

She puts this virtue very simply and very clearly in only eleven words. It is about “being such as we appear and appearing such as we are” – it is both simple and immensely demanding. It involves making truth and honesty our default dispositions – and this is ever more difficult in a world where appearances matter more and more. It is about not fooling ourselves or others, not wearing masks, following the dictum of Mahatma Gandhi that “if you are in a minority of one, the truth is still the truth”. In the conference to her sisters that I mentioned earlier Mary Ward also makes it clear that even knowledge and education, both of which, as we know, she prized highly, are means to the end of truth and in particular the Truth that is God. The truth must be our sheet anchor – and that is another of her lessons to us, a willingness to stand by the truth even when it is uncomfortable for oneself and for others. No-one has more to teach us about standing by one’s truth even in the face of disbelief and rejection.

For her that disbelief and rejection came, as it sometimes can for all of us – as it did for Our Lord himself - from the very place and people to whom we feel we most belong, to which we have given the most commitment and loyalty, for which we have often worked most hard – in her case, the Church. She loved the Church and was loyal to it even when it condemned both her and her work. And yet she stood by her truth, the truth of what she had learnt from God of what He wanted from her. And that is another of her gifts to us – that the pursuit of truth gives meaning and brings integrity – but it does not always bring success.

And so we come to the f-word – and it is failure. When Mary Ward died, the one word that might have been associated with her was failure – her schools had been closed, the vast majority of her followers had, for very understandable reasons melted away, she herself had suffered excruciatingly both physically and spiritually for many years. Nonetheless, she found a way to keep that most precarious of balances – loyalty to an institution which had caused her most of that pain and suffering, allied to the continued conviction that her understanding of God’s call to her was a true understanding which she could not and would not be persuaded to abandon and that all that she had undertaken, dismantled as it mostly now was, was **“a good thing and what God willed”**.

That balance was the balance of the Just Soul, of true freedom, of the “the freedom to refer all to God”. It is not a balance or a freedom that is easily come by for any of us – and it wasn’t, I imagine, easily come by for her. So what does she teach us about failure and the part it plays in our lives – and let us be honest, it does play a part in all of our lives. Robert Louis Stephenson, a famous 19th century English novelist, once said that “Our role in life is not to succeed but to continue to fail in good spirits”. In our own time Nelson Mandela expressed it this way – “I am not a saint unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps trying”. We learn something of that from Mary Ward – magnanimity and generosity of heart and of spirit in adverse circumstances – towards others and, as importantly, towards ourselves. At one point in her life she found herself becoming almost addicted to certain pious practices that she had undertaken in order to deepen her own faith and love of God. As time went on she began to realise that far from doing that, they were becoming an end in themselves so she resolved that **“I will do these things with love and freedom or I will leave them alone”**. That unflinching commitment to the truth led her to realise that the purpose for which she had begun these pious practices was no longer being served – so let them go – but on the other hand don’t beat yourself up about it.

One of her other memorable phrases to her sisters is **“Do your best and God will help”** – which encapsulates the same deep understanding of our, and her, human condition and frailty and her even deeper faith in a God whose understanding of us is only exceeded by his love for us and His compassion towards us.

As a society we are frightened of a lot of things and we turn them into taboo subjects – death is one of those things, pain and suffering are two others and failure is another and yet if you think of some of the people you most admire I bet that one of the things you admire about them is how they have dealt with the difficult things in life – with pain, with suffering, with failure. I’m a great believer that in good novels you find a lot of nuggets of wisdom and in a novel by someone called Salley Vickers one of the characters says that he had come to realise that “sorrow is an architect as well as a demolition expert and maybe, even now, was laying the foundations of a wider view”. I think exactly the same goes for failure and I see Mary Ward and her life as a wonderful example of that – that what looks at the time to be failure and disappointment can in fact be laying the foundations of a wider view.

That is a lesson that we all need to learn again and again; and if we're not afraid of learning it, our lives are and will be so much the richer, not least because one of the things failure teaches us is to be less judgmental – less judgmental of ourselves and less judgmental of other people. I want to make it clear that I'm not talking here about some kind of masochistic view that thinks failure is a good thing in itself – of course it isn't, just as pain isn't and suffering isn't – but it's what you do with them that makes the difference.

And finally, briefly, to love - firstly God's love for and relationship with each of us but, stemming from that, the importance of our relationships with each other. I am ever more convinced that the quality of our lives is directly related to, and dependent on, the quality of our relationships because, in the end, those are the things that endure in our lives and give them value. And when I talk about love and relationships I talk about them in the sense that incorporates their more demanding aspects, aspects such as compassion and forgiveness and largeness of heart – obviously towards others but also towards ourselves.

If we aren't compassionate and forgiving of our own frailty and weakness as God is, it is difficult to see how we can bring those qualities to our relationships with others. I am certain that this is something I have learnt from Mary Ward – just as truth and integrity and sincerity are written right through her life, so is love. You only have to read her correspondence with her own sisters – and the sheer volume of that correspondence reinforces the point – to know how much she invested in other people and the sustaining of her relationships with them and the mutual affection of those relationships. On her deathbed her words to those with her were that they should ***“cherish God's vocation in you – let it be constant, efficacious and loving”*** – surely they are her words to each of us, whatever “God's vocation” in us is – that we live it constantly, efficaciously and lovingly.

So, to conclude this sharing of what I understand to be Mary Ward's model of holiness and not just for members of her Institute or Congregation, a couple of other thoughts. In the past few months I have flown across the Alps several times. I never fly across them without looking down (when the cloud is not obscuring them) and wondering about a woman who was so clear what God wanted of her and for her and her companions that she actually crossed the Alps – on foot or on horseback – not just once but on a number of occasions, in order to try to convince the Pope and the Church which she loved that what God had revealed to her was indeed His will.

And I don't just wonder about her – I thank God for her and for her insights and her faithfulness to them even in the face of failure and rejection.

What kind of woman was she? She was one who tried, every single day, come rain or shine, to live her life as a Just Soul – to be faithful to that crucial insight of 1 November 1615. I feel inadequate as her follower but I am always encouraged by some of the other words in that letter to Fr Roger Lee –

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.

So she did not see herself as an already Just Soul; she saw herself as we see ourselves – as those on the way to becoming just souls, with the help of God’s grace – “at least to some degree”. It’s a way of seeking holiness – wholeness – that is rooted in the everyday, the ordinary, that recognizes that living as well as we can the life that God has given us, finding him in the scripture of our own lives and trying to be faithful to Him and to those around us, in both prayer and action, is what characterises “our way of proceeding”. The defining characteristics that marked the way Mary Ward approached the life and calling that God gave her have something to offer each of us, because they are as relevant now in 2014 as they were three hundred and ninety-nine years ago, because they are characteristics and values that have the eternal written into them in a way that means the landscape in which we try to live by them is literally that – the landscape and not the life. That is the gift of the Venerable Mary Ward, whom Pius XII at the 1953 Congress on the Apostolate of the Laity” referred to as “that incomparable woman whom England in her darkest and most blood-stained hour, gave to the Church”. Aren’t we incomparably blessed to have her as our inspiration and our role model?

Thank you very much indeed.