

YORK MINSTER REFLECTION

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People are impressed by Mary Ward for different reasons. Last week Sister Margaret Leedal was talking to a primary school group about Mary's childhood, the offers of marriage she received and her decision to become a nun instead. At the end one of the girls remarked, 'Just think – four blokes, and she didn't take one of them!' The two best-known images of Mary Ward are the open circle and the boat. The circle shows Mary and her young companions full of hope and excitement as they share the dream of doing great things for God. It offers a strong contrast to the famous Gunpowder Plotters' portrait. Many of the Gunpowder Plotters were related to the women in the open circle. The Plotters had lost faith in God, they had lost hope that anything could change, so they decided on an act of religious terrorism, a deed of desperation that said 'God has failed us, hope has failed us, violence is the only answer'. It is a decision made tragically often today.

Mary Ward and her companions faced the same disappointments and persecutions but they faced them with hope. Theirs was not a vicious circle, leading to death, but a virtuous circle that led to a life lived more fully than any of them had dreamed of. Today that open circle includes all of us here whose lives have been touched in any way by Mary Ward. It's a circle that invites us to enter more deeply into relationship with the one she called the Parent of parents and Friend of all friends. We belong, across different times and cultures, to a group of people who have never lost faith in the potential of human beings, living in hope.

The open circle led to the ship in full sail. Isn't it wonderful to see that sail, blown by the wind of the Holy Spirit, figuring in our beautiful banners made by the ladies of Liverpool Cathedral? Designed by Lily Freeston, the logo of the waves, ready to carry Mary and her companions overseas, reminds us of Jesus, who called men and women of the sea to fish for human souls, and spend their lives spreading the kingdom. Jesus appeared to be sleeping in the midst of the storm which filled his disciples' sails with terror. He called Peter to abandon all certainty and dare to walk on dangerous waters. Mary Ward and her companions faced the same storm and wind, invited by God to leave all that was safe and certain and trust in God's 'unseen goodness'. Here in York and in Germany women were inspired by her to set out on pilgrim journeys, armed only with their faith: Frances Teresa Ball began a new chapter of Mary Ward's story in Ireland, and through her Teresa Dease in Canada and Gonzaga Barry in Australia, all women of courage and unwavering hope. God's saving plan is not easily upset, even by the worst of human failures. The terrible storms of evil which blew over Europe under Hitler and Stalin became another breath of the Spirit, blowing Mary Ward's followers over the sea to Latin America, India, Africa and the Far East, and new foundations continue to this day.

The Eucharist we have shared today in this most glorious of settings reminds us that hope is always stronger than despair and cynicism. The Archbishop of Canterbury of her day said that Mary Ward was more of a nuisance than six or seven Jesuits – and that's saying something! It provoked her into writing her signature on a window in Lambeth Palace with her ring. The chalice used at this Mass contains another ring, given by Cardinal Mercier to the Earl of Halifax during one of many attempts to achieve Christian unity. Today we sign our names to another chapter of hospitality and mutual Christian respect, written in hope of future union.

Many of us have lived with hopes disappointed, friendships betrayed, our best efforts misunderstood and judged. It is the way of Jesus and of those who enlist under the banner of the Cross. Few have lived this mystery with such cheerfulness and grace as Mary Ward. But there is always more to be done. The position of women in the church and in society remains problematic, and all over the world, millions of girls are deprived of even the most basic education. The open circle of community exists in order to give us strength to get into the boat, even if the sails are blown full by storm winds. The same Christ who called fishers of Galilee, and a seventeenth-century Yorkshire girl, calls us each day to have courage and follow within the circumstances of our own life. Each one of us is a pilgrim whether at the beginning, middle or end of our life here on earth. Mary Ward wrote:

‘Remember that God be the end of all your actions, and therein you will find great satisfaction, and think all things easy and possible’. She dared to dream the impossible and it came true, though not in her time. On this day of jubilee celebration, may the Spirit of God make us more loving companions in the open circle, more generous and courageous pilgrims as we sail towards an unknown future full of hope.