

## Mary Ward Service 2022

Candlemas, St Thomas' church  
Osbaldwick

Revd Johannes (Jan) Nobel  
*Priest-in-Charge of Osbaldwick  
with Murton, York*

When Sr Frances emailed me in early December, to arrange today's service, I asked her if she had anyone in mind to provide the homily.

She replied, I quote: 'Now you have been in Osbaldwick for a year I am sure your knowledge of Mary Ward will be well up to doing the homily.'

My initial thought was: Oh no, it's not. I am afraid I know next to nothing about Mary Ward! But I also thought: I *should* know more about here. And I really *want* to know more about her.

So I agreed, and Sr Frances kindly sent me a copy of this book: Sydney Thorne's *Mary Ward – First Sister of Feminism*, published last year.

And I can tell you in all honesty, as soon as I started reading the introduction – Why Mary Ward - I was hooked. What a fascinating woman!

Of course, I knew her name. I had seen her impressive gravestone. I had read the inscription on it. I knew about the connection with the Bar Convent. I even knew about my infamous predecessor 'who was honest enough to be bribed'. But I did know very little about Mary Ward herself, what she stood for, what she believed in, what happened to her.

Sydney Thorne's book very skilfully tells Mary Ward's story, describing her life within the historical, political, cultural and ecclesiastical context of her time.

The book reminded me of a great eulogy. What I mean is this: Sometimes when you attend a funeral of someone you didn't know that well at all, and you hear their eulogy, you cannot help but feel that you would have liked to meet this person when they were still alive, and

have a good chat. Sydney's book had that effect on me. I wanted to meet Mary. I wanted to hear her own words.

Luck, or divine providence, led me to this little book: *The Heart and Mind of Mary Ward*. You may be familiar with it – it was published in 1985, at the fourth centenary of her birth. This book contains many direct quotes and sayings of Mary, and as such I found it a very suitable companion piece to Sydney Thorne's biographical storytelling. Here I heard Mary's own voice! And it sounded all the clearer because of what I now knew about her life.

By the way – I am not on commission from the publishers. I am just being honest!

Back to Mary.

What a fascinating time of history did she live in. History is usually told by the winners, isn't it? And at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, Mary was not on their side. She was on the side of

the persecuted, here in in England.

What must it have been like? To grow up outside your own family home, shielding from the protestant authorities. What must it have been like to have so many relatives and friends who personally suffered or even died for their convictions? What must it have been like to hear about the failed gunpowder plot, and to realise you know most of the characters by face! What must it have been like to grow up in the care of strong female role models, devoutly catholic women, who guarded the flame of the true faith quite independently from the men in their lives?

And that's only the start of Mary's life. Next, her story takes us to the war-torn continent.

You may have guessed from my accent, that I am not from these islands originally. I was born and I grew up in the Netherlands. And my family background could not be more different from Mary Ward's.

First of all – we weren't a well-to-do family. We didn't have access to large Yorkshire country houses. We might have been noblemen in a dim past when we first got our family name, Nobel, but not in living memory. Quite different from Mary.

Secondly, and more importantly, we were protestants. And not just any protestants. Proud, conservative protestants. The story goes that my ancestors moved from France to The Netherlands around the time of Mary Ward. It's very likely that my they fled as religious refugees, from catholic France to protestant Holland. Rumours are we were Huguenots. Perhaps that's when we lost the family fortunes. But never mind, now we were *Calvinists* and very proud of it. My grandmother worked as a servant for one of the most important Calvinist pastors in the Netherlands. My uncle married into a family of famous preachers. When I was baptised as a baby, I wasn't so much baptised in the Christian Faith as baptised in the one true

church, God's own elect, a tiny splinter group of congregations only found in The Netherlands.

Yes, we thought of ourselves in much the same terms as the English Catholics thought of themselves in Mary's time: *We* considered ourselves the remnant of the true faith. We even imagined *we* were persecuted, in the sense that our conservative ways were ridiculed by the modern world. But our lives were never in danger. So, despite some similarities, we couldn't be more different from Mary Ward and her family.

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Isn't it beautiful irony then, that I am preaching this afternoon, for this service in honour of Mary Ward? There is something truly wonderful about that, I think. It makes me happy!

Because at least here today, some of the deep divisions of the past have been healed and reconciled. Our ancestors may have hung, drawn, and quartered each

other, our ancestors may have had to flee from each other's brutal oppressions, but today we are joint as one in celebration.

And for me, this is not just as a half-hearted token of tolerance during the *one* Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the year. No, I believe we truly have moved on, and we have gained a better understanding of Jesus' desire for his children to be *one*, and of St Paul's teaching about unity and *diversity* in the body of Christ.

Of course, Mary Ward was well ahead of her time when it comes to ideas about equality. She will have treasured that quote from St Paul: *There neither male nor female, because all are one in Christ Jesus.*

And dare I say, had she lived in our day and age, she would have surely extended that inclusivity to the whole church of God: *There is neither Catholic nor Protestant, because all are one in Christ Jesus.*

We know for a fact that Mary's funeral was attended by a good number of both Catholics and Protestants, and that in the early days of the Bar Convent there were respectful relationships with the protestant archbishop of York.

You see - when it comes to ecumenical relationships, it often works well on the ground - where the people know each other. It's only when you try and establish that same unity on paper, appealing to the higher regions of the church hierarchy - if you travel, like Mary, to Rome, as it were - that seemingly unsurmountable obstacles emerge on your path.

I'd happily settle for what we've got here tonight. Ecumenism on the ground. Don't tell the bishop, would be my advice.

But I wonder, would Mary agree with me? Perhaps not. When it came to her own pursuit to 'Take the same of the Society', Mary believed that, if her dream was to succeed, she needed to gain approval at the very highest

level. No compromise. To *persevere* in the same. For Mary this was not only *her* dream, this was *God's* dream.

You know, Mary Ward could so easily have settled for just one or two schools, in a quiet corner of Europe, with the backing of a local ruler and a bishop who was willing to kindly overlook one or two things. This is what others religious women at the time had settled for did. I studied theology in Leuven, in Belgium, and I fondly remember the Begijnhof, the tiny cottages were the beguines lived. Women in godly service.

But Mary Ward's vision was bigger. The *same* as the Society. The *same* and nothing less. Because, why not?

And she walked all the way to Rome for it, twice of her own accord, and third time when summoned. Despite her health. Despite the lack of funds. Despite the hostility. Despite the political turmoil in Europe. Despite the winter weather. Despite *anything*, really. Nothing

could stop her. She was uncompromising.

You know who she makes me think of, in our world today?

Greta Thunberg. Young. Female. Uncompromising. Unafraid to stand before the highest authorities to make her case. And a wicked sense of humour, too.

Funnily enough, whereas Mary Ward tried to get young girls to *attend* schools, Greta Thunberg is known for her school *strikes*. But the two would get along, I like to think. Kindred spirits. Both of them inspiring and uniting a large group of followers, from all walks of life. Both of them traveling with a minimum carbon footprint, come to think of it. And both of them meeting the pope.

Pope Francis warmly recommended Greta to continue her mission.

So may the Lord bless Greta on her mission, and may the Lord bless all who follow Mary Ward

and all who make her story  
known to the world.

May the time soon come when  
Mary will be better known and  
celebrated for her extraordinary  
legacy.

May the time soon come when  
*all* people will come together, to  
fight for equality, emancipation,  
and justice.

May the time soon come when  
*all* God's children will recognise  
that they are members of the one  
body, united in Christ,  
expressing unity in celebrating  
diversity, rather than in  
uniformity.

In Mary Ward's own words: *God  
is rich enough for us all.*

Amen.