



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK



Archbishop Stephen gave the sermon at [St Thomas' Church Osbaldwick](#) at the annual service to celebrate the life of Mary Ward. This follows in full

"Do not be afraid... For I am with you to deliver you,' says the Lord.

Then the Lord put out his hands and touch my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth.'"

- Jeremiah 1. 8-9

About 400 years ago, Mary Ward, visited one of my esteemed predecessors.

Unfortunately, he was out. Or perhaps crouching beneath the window and twitching the net curtains, wondering when this rather remarkable, but also deeply challenging woman was going to go away.

She left a calling card, and a diamond ring.

I don't know what happened to either – perhaps one of her sisters today will be able to tell us afterwards – and I'm sure that in the intervening years quite a few of my predecessors have visited sisters at the [Bar Convent](#) here in York where sisters from the Order she founded have lived for several centuries, but I am humbled and deeply honoured to be here today, delivering this address and responding to her call and joining with her in wanting to make God's church a place of equal dignity for women and men, and for those women and men to be given an equal opportunity in education, and in the opportunity to serve.

The Convent itself, as most of you well know, was established 40 years after her death – she never lived to see her vision truly realised - but it was Mary Ward's determination to found an order for women, the Congregation of Jesus, based on the example of the male Jesuit order, that has made her such an influential and sometimes controversial figure in the Church.

Describing her influence, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbott, said that she was worse than six Jesuits. And even within the Roman Catholic Church the Order she founded did not receive official approval until 1877. She was even imprisoned and labelled a heretic because she refused to be constrained by what was then expected of women in the religious life. Her simple, but challenging and provocative, message that women and girls should have the same opportunities in education, and therefore opportunities in life as men and boys, was centuries ahead of its time, and is still contested today, both in the church, and in the world.

‘Fear itself, is the only thing you need fear,’ said, Mary Ward... ‘There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things – and I hope in God, it will be seen that women in time to come will do much.’

In our day we see so much of the fulfilment of this vision, but there is still much to do. Within all parts of the church, it is rare that the ministry of women is accepted without condition. And while I acknowledge the conscientiously held differences of theological conviction which exist in the Church I serve and remains the case within the Roman Catholic Church, (and it is certainly not my place to tell another Church what to do), I do believe that all of us, whatever our denomination or belief, needs to be challenged by her tenacious example.

St Paul speaks about the new humanity we have in Christ. In this new humanity barriers are broken down. One of them is between women and men. This is reconfigured in Christ, and we are no longer able to pretend that one is superior to the other (See Galatians 3. 28).

Differences remain. Complementarity and diversity exists. But there is equality of dignity, and therefore, like Mary Ward, I believe there should be equality of opportunity, and also like Mary Ward, I see that education is the key. Therefore, as we remember her example today, we should look to her fearlessness and let it bolster our own witness today.

She knocked on the door of the Archbishop of York. She infuriated the Archbishop of Canterbury. She even travelled to Rome on foot, to take her case for change to the Pope himself. And she was buried here in Osbaldwick Churchyard. An Anglican church. The established church. And at a time when religious difference meant division and conflict. (Three of her uncles were executed for their alleged involvement in the gunpowder plot).

I don't know how this came about – her burial here – but at the time, Catholics were not allowed to be buried in an Anglican churchyard. But here she is, even her death and burial, a sign of barriers being broken down, that the Church is, as our reading from the first letter to the church in Corinth, made clear, ‘one body with different members, where aware it is simply not possible for the eye to say to the hand, I have no need of you’ (see 1 Corinthians 12. 20-21).

Last year, I visited Rome for the first time. I didn't go on foot; that it is something I may have to consider. The main purpose of the visit was a dialogue with Cardinal Tagle on evangelisation, discipleship, and Christian unity, hosted by the Anglican Centre in Rome. But as part of the visit, and to my great surprise and joy, I had an audience with the Pope.

I wasn't sure what to expect. I wondered whether we might go in, say hello, exchange, a few pleasantries, and that would be that.

Well, we did go in. We did say hello. We did exchange a few pleasantries. But then, beckoning towards the adjacent parlour, the Pope said to me and the little group with me, Let us sit down and talk.

We probably only talked for twenty minutes or so. And of course I know that I was just one person among thousands, that the Pope sits and talks with each year. But I was there on pilgrimage, and I was there on mission, and I had come to talk about the scandal of our disunity, and how we

underestimate the damage it does to our witness, for how do we expect the world to believe that we have a message of reconciliation, if we cannot even be reconciled ourselves, and cannot even break bread together, and continue to turn our backs on the astonishing, challenging and revolutionary message of the gospel that we are all baptised into one body, Jews, or Greeks, slaves are free, men and women, Roman Catholic and Anglican, and Methodist and Baptist and Pentecostal, and north and south and east and west, and 'mackem' and 'tackem', and Celtic and Rangers and, yes, white and red rose counties, we are all made to drink of one Spirit, that, indeed the body does not consist of one member, but of many.

And the Pope said to me that we must walk together and work together, and pray together.

And those words of stayed with me, and these words challenged me.

And I see this ecumenical, educational and evangelistic spirit in the sisters of the Bar Convent, the sisters of Mary Ward. And I see it shining very brightly in Mary Ward herself.

Then, as the meeting was drawing to a close, the Pope invited us to pray. And, of course, the prayer we offered was the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught his church. And I know I'm a slow learner, but in those moments of saying the Lord's Prayer with Pope Francis, what struck me powerfully was the very first word. Our. Not my father. Not my God. But ours. Which also means that, whether I like it or not, or even whether I particularly believe it or want it or not, when I say this prayer, the prayer of Jesus, I am declaring that all those who say it with me, are my sisters and my brothers, and therefore people to whom I owe an allegiance and carry a responsibility.

Mary Ward knew this well. She was, if I have understood the spirit of the Order correctly, wanting to be a companion, a sister of Jesus. It is to such sisterhood and companionship that we turn. For the unity that is Christ's prayer for his church, and for which I long, will, I believe, only be found as we come closer and closer to Jesus, and follow in his way, and therefore discover our belonging to each other, see old barriers fall away, and as the Pope also joked with me, leave the theologians and bishops to catch up.

Like the Holy Spirit itself, always with us, and always ahead of us, Mary Ward was a pioneer. She moved the Church forwards. In his visit to York in 1982, Pope John Paul II described her as an 'extraordinary Yorkshire woman and a pioneer.'

Dear friends, we need her example and witness in our world today, and we can all learn from her fearlessness.

Therefore, I am glad to add my support to the campaign to declare her a saint, because not just here in Yorkshire, but across our world, we need her example and witness, and we can certainly learn from her faithful fearlessness.

Jeremiah, like all the prophets, and like, I suppose all of us, who try to follow where Jesus leads, and certainly for Mary Ward at many moments in

her life, was frightened, and felt ill equipped for the things God was calling from him.

‘I’m only a boy,’ he said to the Lord. And there may have been times when Mary Ward said, I’m only a girl. And it is most definitely the case that many people said this to her

But the Lord is clear: ‘Do not say this... you shall go to whom I send... you shall speak what I command’ (Jeremiah 1. 6-7). ‘You do not need to be afraid... I am with you and I will put my words in your mouth’ (Jeremiah 1. 8-9).

We praise and thank God this afternoon for the life and witness of Mary Ward. She shows us what it is like, both the achievement and the cost, to follow Jesus fearlessly and faithfully. Let us pledge to do the same. Let us dream the church, which transcends our current divisions, and serves the world. A new humanity in Jesus Christ.

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/speaking-and-writing/sermons/mary-ward-annual-service-st-thomas-church-osbaldwick>