

In Mary Sumner's Footsteps

A Reflection for Mary Sumner Celebrations 2023

In Newcastle Cathedral on Thursday 3rd August we celebrated Midday Prayer and Holy Communion with Mary Sumner as our inspiration. The reflective service included gentle unaccompanied singing, led by MU choir members, including a version of Psalm 139: 'O God you search me and you know me'. Intercessions, led by members of St Francis MU, were based on Mary Sumner's Prayer. The readings from Micah 6.6-8, James 2.14-17 and John 15.1-8 helped us to see our own worth as branches of the True Vine and, through that understanding, to see what God is calling us to become. Canon Peter Dobson, a member of MU, preached. His sermon touched all who heard it and he has given us permission to post it on our website for others to read.

Readings: Micah 6.6-8 / James 2.14-17 / John 15.1-8

Sermon: Canon Peter Dobson

'Know your place' ... I wonder if this is an instruction you have ever received? It is an expression that does not have many positive connotations in common parlance; it is an expression and instruction used, so often, to oppress, to control or diminish people. I fear it is an expression that women have been on the receiving-end of more often than have men, far too often down history, and sadly (very sadly) still today. It is an expression that has been concerned with putting people in their place. However, when understood, when meant, and expressed differently, **knowing our place** can be **positive, liberating** even. To feel that we are in the right place, able to be ourselves and use our gifts for good in the place where we feel we are at home, or meant to be, can be transformative. Praise God today, as we look forward to Mary Sumner Day, that is exactly what we are celebrating! A woman who understood who she was and, understanding who she was, and what her gifts were, made sense of her life situation and the situation in life of many others like her. A woman who chose to help herself and those other women become a transformative force **where they were** and **from there**, far beyond to a **worldwide** fellowship and movement. We have come together today both to be thankful for Mothers Union, and to reflect more about its significance today.

You might have noticed that each of our readings today are themselves concerned with how we come to understand ourselves, our gifts, and the place we find ourselves in life. When it comes to understanding ourselves though, you might notice that they offer a solution to a trap we can so often fall into, the trap of too often defining ourselves, or, rather **reducing** ourselves to what we **have** rather than who we **are**, or, worse, what **we once had** as opposed to who we are still now, and are **yet to become**, at whatever stage and in whichever kind of place we find ourselves in life.

As I read today's readings and thought again about Mary Sumner's story I was reminded of somebody else's story: the story of a young man* who, unlike Mary Sumner, did not yet possess a sense of who he was that made him secure, that made sense of **his** place in life. Lost and confused, in the end he thinks he's being called to be a monk of all things! He goes to try and be part of a religious community, **does** everything that is asked of him, **says** his prayers, **does** his chores, but after months and months of doing all that is turned down from becoming a full part of the community twice! He comes to build up a relationship with one of the monks who keeps himself to himself, who some others think is just a maverick, Fr. Alypius. The young man pours his heart out for what feels like hours and at the end of it all, Fr. Alypius asks:

"I have just one question for you, 'who are you?'"

"I just told you," says the young man.

"No", replies Fr. Alypius, *"you told me about the clothes you wear. You told me your name, where you're from, what you've done, the things you've studied. Your problem is you don't know who you are. Let me tell you what you are. **You are a ray of God's own light.**"*

The young man thinks this all sounds a bit odd, daft in-fact, but intrigued he asks, *"What do you mean?"*

Fr. Alypius goes on, *"You say you seek God, but a ray of light doesn't seek the sun; it's coming from the sun. **You are a branch on the vine of God.** A branch doesn't seek the vine; it's already part of the vine. A wave doesn't look for the ocean, it's already full of ocean. Because you don't know that **who** you are is **one** with God, you believe all these labels about yourself: I'm a sinner, I'm a saint, I'm*

a worm and no man, I'm a monk, I'm a nurse. These are all labels, clothing. They serve a purpose, but they are not who you are. To the extent that you believe these labels, you believe a lie and you add anguish upon anguish. It's what most of us do for most of our lives. In the secular world we call it a career. In monastic terms we call it our vocation."

"Before you can know in your own experience what the Psalmist meant when he said, 'Be still and know that I am God,' you must first learn to be still and know who you are. The rest will follow".

Just as Fr. Alypius reminded that lost young man, today we too are reminded that it is only as vines on the branch of God's life that **we find true life**. Our readings remind us that there are all sorts of motions we can go through to define ourselves, and there are even lots of good things we can do, nice things we can say, worthy prayers we can pray and necessary acts of service too, **but** if we are doing those things to help define ourselves, and understand ourselves, we are on a hiding to nothing, at whatever stage or place we find ourselves in life! Only when we act from, and understand ourselves fundamentally as, branches on God's vine, rays of God's light, waves in God's ocean, will we have life. It was in Mary Sumner understanding that she was as a precious child of God, that she came to understand her motherhood and grandmotherhood as part of her calling from God. In that understanding she was able to begin a work that has helped millions of others (including us) understand that they are themselves children of God with their own calling too. For, it was Mary Sumner who herself said that only by being ourselves would we help children and others become themselves; and it was Mary Sumner who, when things were going wrong, and in the face of the turmoil of the world and the unrest between nations, said she wanted her whole life to become a prayer. That daily, hourly, every moment prayer is how we remind ourselves to find what matters, who we are, and then, and only then, what we are supposed to do: emanating from us as branches on God's vine, rays of God's own light and waves in God's vast and magnificent ocean. Amen.

**A story from 'Into the Silent Land' by Martin Laird.*