

MARY – THE UNTIER OF KNOTS

'A wealthy man decided to go on a safari in Africa. He took his faithful pet dog along for company. One day, the dog starts chasing butterflies and before long the dog discovers that he is lost. So, wandering about he notices a leopard heading rapidly towards him with the obvious intention of having him for lunch. The dog thinks, "OK, I'm in deep trouble now!"

'Then he notices some bones on the ground close by and immediately settles down to chew on the bones with his back to the approaching hungry cat. Just as the leopard is about to leap, the dog exclaims loudly, "Boy, that was one delicious leopard. I wonder if there are any more around here?" Hearing this, the leopard halts his attack in mid-stride, as a look of terror comes over him, and he slinks away into the trees to safety. "Whew," says the leopard, "That was a close one – that dog nearly had me."

'Meanwhile, a monkey who had been watching the whole scene from a nearby tree, figures he can put this knowledge to good use and trade it for protection from the leopard. So, off he goes. But the dog sees him heading after the leopard with great speed and reckons that something is amiss. The monkey soon catches up with the leopard, spills the beans and strikes a deal for himself with the leopard.

'The leopard is furious at being made a fool of and says, "Here monkey, hop on my back and see what's going to happen to that conniving canine." Now the dog sees the leopard coming with the monkey on his back, and thinks, "What am I going to do now?" But instead of running, the dog sits down with his back to his attackers, pretends he hasn't seen them yet.....and just when they get close enough to hear, the dog rather loudly, says, "Where is that useless monkey? I sent him off half an hour ago to bring me another leopard."

Like the dog in the story, we are somewhat lost in a socio-political jungle which is often threatening and treacherous. So we sometimes need the dog's inventive skill and ingenuity to foil the acts of injustice and inequality that surround us, even when it can nearly cost us our lives. Albert Camus wrote in *The Plague*, "The pestilence is at once blight and revelation; it brings the hidden truth of a corrupt world to the surface." If this is true of the Covid-19 virus, as it was of the plague of Camus's novel, then what is happening at the moment is telling us something important about our society. It has come to light that there has been a dramatic inequality in Covid-19 deaths; high rates among black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, and now the highest excess mortality in Europe.

Statistics show that from 2010 life expectancy in Britain had slowed down dramatically. For more than 100 years, life expectancy had been improving. But by 2018 it had ground to a halt. Also, during this period health inequalities continued to increase. Perhaps it is not surprising then that the more deprived areas had the higher number of deaths. This is also reflected in a reduction in public spending: in the least deprived 20% of areas, local government spending went down by 16%; in the most deprived it went down by 32%. The greater the need was, more spending was reduced – amazing! Truly, the present government is making the poor poorer! In addition to the general mistrust of the nation by the government, we had the legacy of specific cuts. The NHS supposedly ringfenced in an age of austerity, had not kept up with historic trends and practically left with less than 1% increase in 2010. The budget of Public Health England has been cut by 40% in real terms between its funding in 2012 and 2019-20, that is a reduction by £700 million. Spending on adult social care was also reduced by 3% in the least deprived 20% local areas and by 16% in the most deprived areas. So, even before the pandemic, we see that the overall health of the nation had stopped improving and inequality in general was getting worse, making the nation ripe and more susceptible to the coronavirus pandemic, which has took us by storm. We have witnessed the consequences with over 40,000 deaths in England alone, the highest in Europe – and it is still not over!

This Sunday is the lovely feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – yet in 1645 the House of Commons passed the following decree: "That all such pictures as have the representation of the Virgin Mary upon them shall be forthwith burned." So, after the Reformation, not a single significant statue of Our Lady remained in the churches of England, even the famous Lincoln Cathedral despite the fact that the building was dedicated to her. Yet, by 2014, four hundred years later, a seven-foot sculpture of the Blessed Virgin Mary was unveiled in that same cathedral. The Dean said that this would remember the

fact that there has been little acknowledgement of Mary for much of its life. It seems that even the reformed churches had finally come to realise that Christianity can never be complete without Mary.

Pope Francis is very much aware of this. When he was a student in Germany, he became familiar with a famous 18th century painting called, "Mary, Untier of Knots." It was based on the idea that, while Eve tied humanity in knots through her disobedience, Mary untied them by her obedience to God's word. Pope Francis at one of his New Year Masses said, "Jesus cannot be understood without his mother, and no other creature has ever seen God's face shine upon it as did Mary. She gave a human face to the eternal Word, so that all of us can contemplate him. She, the Mother of God, is also Mother of the Church and through the Church, the mother of all men and women and every people."

It is clear that Mary was present at the birth of Jesus – we obviously know that. But what we do not always appreciate is that later, over 30 years later, she reappears in the Upper Room when the Pentecostal Spirit descends upon the first disciples, and thus, she is also present at the birth of the Church ("All joined in continuous prayer, together with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and with the brothers." Acts 1:14).

So we, Mary's children, are united by an unbreakable bond. Mary is the mother of the God made flesh, the mother of the Church, our mother, the mother of all those who sing, suffer, and search. Neglect, decrees, and persecution cannot dim her loving presence or power. In every age, she continues to reveal the face of God – because in every age she unties knots.

And there are many "knots" that need untying in our present situation. The most damaging "knot" seems to be the fear surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. Jesus in the gospels says to his disciples and all the people "Do not be afraid...." no less than 38 times. He reminds us constantly that the Father cares for us and KNOWS our needs even before we ask him. Some of us are afraid of touching others, meeting up with friends and loved ones, even leaving the house! Let alone going back to church!

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who lived in a palace with her selfish mother. The mother's husband had died and her daughter was her only child. The mother feared that one day she will meet a handsome prince and go off and marry him leaving her alone to a life miserable loneliness. So she decided to get rid of all the mirrors in the palace and told her daughter that she was so ugly that no one would ever look at her, let alone marry her. So every time a handsome prince came along to visit the princess, she would never come out to meet them believing that she was too hideous to be seen. However, after a few years, a certain prince decided that he would "break" into the palace and find the princess and judge for himself what the princess looked like. He climbed the tall tower and got in through one of the windows and made his way to the princess's room. He knocked on the door and told him that he was an admirer and wanted to meet her. But the princess told him to go fearing that she was so ugly that it would immediately drive him away. But the prince broke through the door into her room – the princess ran into a corner of the room and hid her face. The prince approached and told her to look into the mirror he was holding. She slowly turned around and when she saw her reflection in the mirror, seeing how beautiful she really was, she was free."

Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32). What kept the beautiful princess locked up were not locked doors and walls, but her own fears. We discover that true LOVE overcomes all fear – we must not let fear dominate our lives, tying us up in knots, but to ask Our Lady to help us break these bonds of fear that lie within us. Only then can we walk in the light of Christ and live in freedom as the children of God.

PS: My uncle Jack died earlier in the week – may he rest in peace. He was my dad's youngest brother and he was 80 years old. His funeral is next Friday, which I will be taking in Huddersfield. His death reminds me of my uncle Jimmy's funeral a few years ago. When we were celebrating his death afterwards at the "Four Sons" pub, Uncle Jack went up to my brother Chris and said to him, "Hi Chris, how about buying your favourite uncle a pint?" To which Chris answered, "I would Jack, but he has just died!" Nice one Chris!!