

Lady Day 2018 Address

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said: Here I am.

May the words on my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O risen Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Those words come from Psalm 40, which we heard just now as our OT reading. This psalm is set for today as we celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation, Lady Day. No doubt it has been chosen by those who determine our lectionary because it echoes, or rather prefigures, the words of Mary as she responds to the startling message of the angel Gabriel, saying *Here I am*.

On Lady Day last year, I suggested that we might do well to note from this Gospel reading not only the **obedience** of Our Lady as she hears this message, but also her **humility** and her **readiness** to play her part in the **salvation of others**, of the whole human race, which of course included **Mary herself**.

I am sure we all will have noted those themes anew as we listened once again to the familiar passage from the Gospel of Luke. But the themes are present in both Psalm 40 and the story of the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke. Both readings sum up these themes of **obedience**, **humility** and **readiness** to play a part, by using those inspiring words of **self offering** that the **Blessed Virgin Mary**, and later Mary Sumner following in the footsteps

of Our Lady, and I hope all of us utter daily as we live out our Christian calling. The words are of course: *Here I am*

We hear in our **OT** reading of **Psalm 40** that *God does not desire sacrifice and offering*. That might seem strange as we reflect on our **NT** Gospel reading; that is on the sacrifice and self offering that Our Lady was being asked to make by the angel Gabriel, not only at the time of asking but also in the future. Who can forget the heartbreaking Pieta, Our Lady of Sorrows cradling the dead body of her son, sacrificed for the sins of the whole world, just as she cradled his living body after his birth.

But if we view these words within their original context of the Hebrew Bible, our OT, they seem even more strange. The offering of sacrifice to God was commanded in the Torah: both sin offerings (a kind of purification ritual) and burnt offerings (a sacrifice of well being offered as a tribute to God, in which, at least originally, the offering was entirely burnt on the altar, so that the smoke, incense-like, and prayer-like might ascend to heaven). And here is Psalm 40 saying that God does not require sacrifice and burnt offering!

With the benefit of hindsight, we in our time can see a prophecy within this Psalm. We know that in time the Old Covenant between God and his people would be replaced by a New Covenant embodied in Jesus Christ himself; that the old ways of responding to God's word were to give way to the new. Remarkably, the Psalmist, without the benefit of such hindsight, nevertheless displays the same **humble obedience** as does Mary

to this new and shocking commandment, and says: says *Here I am*.

The **key thing** for the Psalmist, for Our Lady as she was addressed by the angel, for Mary Sumner as she felt God's call on her life, and for all of us as we live out our Christian lives, is that we should be **ready to do God's will**, to play our part in the salvation of others, that is in bringing in the Kingdom of God as begun by Jesus Christ. We all want to say: *I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart*.

But to do that down the ages, old ways have to give way to the new, just as the Old Covenant based on the Law had to make way for the New Covenant embodied in Jesus Christ born of Mary. We have to learn how to *proclaim the Gospel afresh in every generation* if the Good News of God's love for all humanity is to be heard by his people, whoever they are, whatever their culture, time and place.

These themes of **obedience, humility and readiness** to play a part, that culminate in **self offering** are very much present within the Mothers' Union. They always have been from the days of Mary Sumner herself, and still are today. But there is increasing recognition within the Mothers' Union, at national and international level, that old ways have to give way to new. The first AGM I attended a couple of years ago voted overwhelmingly for change.

This is not change merely for change's sake, but because the world around us has changed. It is still God's world, but it is not

the world it used to be. Such change has invaded concepts the MU holds dear, not least marriage and family life. Many today spurn the very idea of marriage and set up families that are nevertheless true families, but ones that are not bound by the sacrament of marriage. The very concept of 'family' has undergone enormous change in our times. Families today come in all shapes, sizes and genders. Old ideas are giving way to new.

The MU at national and international level has, to its great credit, realised this and launched the new MULO project, that is an MU project that aims to LISTEN to its members and to our local communities *with an open ear*, as Psalm 40 puts it; to OBSERVE each other's projects and our society today, with a view to deciding how the MU may best ACT to serve families in our time and context.

As MULO asks, whose lives **are we** and **could we** be touching? **How** can we most effectively make a lasting difference in those lives? The aim is to give the Mothers' Union a toolkit for putting our faith into action **in our time and place**, as did Mary Sumner in her day, and as do you today, following in her footsteps. This MULO project will, I believe, be the salvation of the Mothers' Union itself, just as much as salvation of those whom we seek to serve. As she listened to the angel, and responded *Here I am*, Our Lady was herself caught up in the salvation she was bringing to the world through her **obedience, humility, and readiness to play her part**.

MULO is the implementation of that vote for change taken at the AGM 2 years ago. It is a project that will equip us for our

work today as we turn outwards to God's world, offering ourselves in service to his people. Here in Cirencester I like to think we are a step or two ahead of the game, as over a year ago we launched our MU Think Tank to ponder and to address just these kinds of questions.

As the Psalmist says we need to see how in our time and context we can *speak of the faithfulness and salvation of God*. How can we reach out into our communities so that God's love for humanity is not concealed within churches that too many do not even visit, much less attend regularly, but rather is spoken in the greater congregation of our local community?

Some of you are well underway with such **self offering**, as you say *Here I am* in humble service to families in our wider community through new initiatives with the Churn Project, knitting of blankets for premature or stillborn babies, squares for bra inserts for mastectomy patients; and for older projects such as The Family Haven in Gloucester which some of us revisited the other day, supported by the MU since its inception. Such established projects still continue to bear much fruit. Staff at The Family Haven spoke movingly of how much an away day, funded through the MU's flagship scheme AFIA, had meant to The Family Haven families.

But this is just a start. Who knows what will come out of the listening and observing project that is MULOA? It is important not to prejudge, but to truly listen and observe; and not only to each other and to our local communities, but also to God's word for us as the Mothers' Union. Once we have done that, then we

shall be equipped to ACT, to *do the will of God*, as Psalm 40 says. Whatever he says to us, we should do it, to quote Our Lady!

Meantime, let us pray that God will not withhold his mercy from us as we engage in this consultation period. As Psalm 40 says, and as MULOA and all of us pray, *may God let his steadfast love and faithfulness keep us*, and the work of the Mothers' Union across the world, *safe for ever*. Amen.

**I am no longer my own,
Use me as you choose.
So now, God of glory,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are mine and I am your own.**