

Meditation for Mothering Sunday 2020

Quite often clergy will resort to preaching today on the Blessed Virgin Mary as a biblical archetype of motherhood and caring (well aware of people's occasional resistance to the BVM). They would refer to Mary the mother of Jesus as an exemplar of the sort of values referred to in today's Epistle Colossians 3.12 (NLT)

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

If we were in St Barnabas' Church this morning I might refer to the *Eleousa* icon of Our Lady of Tenderness, the Virgin of Lovingkindness given by Fr Tony and Irene, and blessed by Bishop Michael in December 2018: it depicts Mary and the infant Christ cheek-to-cheek in a warm loving embrace, a perfect representation of caring.

But this is not quite the Gospel set for today. Rather we are invited to see Mary at the foot of the Cross:

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother... When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." (John 19:25-27 NIV).

Poignantly, we are drawn to think of a Mother standing beside her suffering Son. We recall Simeon's words to Mary uttered when she brought the infant Jesus to be presented in the Temple: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34). Here is another archetype for Mothering Sunday: one which resonates powerfully with our current situation. I see Mary here as an exemplar of three things: compassion, contemplation, community.

Compassion

Of course the word literally means: 'suffering with.' As we see Mary standing at the foot of the Cross, in solidarity with her suffering Son, feeling helpless perhaps but longing to send into his watching eyes a look of unspeakable

love....we recognize our call in this time of crisis. Like Mary we stand, as it were, alongside those who are isolated, anxious and suffering. We want to find ways to send them a look of love and solidarity. Our hearts, fuelled by the love of Christ, are brimming with compassion. We can express our solidarity, our standing with others – across our Parish and Diocese and beyond – at the foot of their Cross, through the mystery of prayer and intercession, which as former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey memorably put it, is ‘coming before God with the people on our hearts.’

Contemplation

St Luke’s gospel, which depicts Mary as exemplar and as first Christian, tells us that Mary’s heart is a heart of contemplation. Three times he emphasizes this in the nativity story:

all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2: 18,19)

The child’s mother marvelled at what was said about him. (Luke 2:33)

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:51, 52).

She is discovering the prayer of contemplation, in which we come before God with all our confusions and hopes and surrender ourselves totally to God. It is the experience of exposing to God the hidden depths of our hearts. It is also the experience of learning to receive from God his healing and invigorating love, which alone can make us whole.

The Greek word translated ‘pondering’ is rich in meaning. It denotes a ‘coming together’ as in a bringing together, a uniting of different rivers. Mary is reconciling in her heart different streams of thought. The Greek verb ‘pondering’ can mean collecting up disparate elements, bring them into some sort of unity. It can also mean to play one’s part, to contribute of one’s own goods. All these meanings converge in Mary’s prayer of contemplation, as she seeks to pull together conflicting forces, the desire to protect her child and the need to share him. Her hopes and her fears are beginning to

meet. She is discovering the particular part God wants her to play, and is coming to terms with what she must contribute. Luke conveys to us the agonising that Mary is facing, which develops slowly into a clearer sense of purpose, a wholeness emerging out of fragmented impressions of what is happening to her. Mary is also learning to hold the paradoxes of her vocation within a creative tension.

So too for us at this present moment as we stand at the foot of the world's Cross with Mary. In prayer we both express our confusions and heartaches and also enter a silence of contemplation in which we can reflect on our questions: where is God in all this? What should I be doing? What should the Church be doing? How can I make any sense of it? At the foot of the Cross Mary exemplifies for us the prayer of pondering.

Wondering how you can redeem the time in this period of forced isolation? Establish periods of prayer. Intercede. Ponder. Above all try to listen to God.

Community

A third element in today's Gospel that resonates with our current crisis is community. At the foot of the Cross, precisely in the very midst of suffering, on the very hill of Calvary, in the very hour of the Passion, new relationships are being forged.

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother."

In the Fourth Gospel, the Beloved Disciple, who is never named, is a symbolic figure. He – the one who laid on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper – stands for all of us beloved disciples. He is, throughout the Gospel, a representative of the Church. Now the Church, in his person, is entrusted into the care of the Mother: 'Here is your Mother'. There is a mutuality of care, for to the Mother Jesus says 'This is your son.'

Significantly, in the fourth gospel, straight after this episode it says: 'Jesus knew all was now accomplished.' This forging of a new community seals and completes Jesus' work. He has done what he set out to do...This scene 'really constitutes the climactic work in his ministry' (M. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, p154).

This is perhaps our hardest challenge in this crisis period: how do we maintain our Christian fellowship and relationships, our sense of shared community? Linked to the word 'community' is the verb 'communicate'. Be

creative and imaginative and proactive in communicating with others. Be Mary and the Beloved Disciple to each other...in a 21st century sort of way – stay in touch with each other, by phone, text, email, social media. Take the first step in being in touch with others, even though that is not right now a physical touch (how the people of St Barnabas will miss the exuberant hugging and kissing at the Sign of the Peace!!). Find alternatives!! Be an encouragement to one another. This is our key vocation and calling right now.

So, on this Mothering Sunday 2020 we are reflecting on the usual theme of caring, and celebrate and give thanks for mothers and all carers. In a very poignant way, we find ourselves standing with the Mother at the foot of the Cross.

Let us use this time to practise and develop the art of compassion, contemplation and community.

God bless you

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