

The three Rs of motherhood

The Ven Paul Thomas's Sermon for 14 March 2021

Gospel Reading: John 19 v25b – 27

Mothing Sunday

John's description of the exchange between Jesus and his mother at the cross furnishes us with three deep insights into motherhood.

The first insight is what I would call the **reality of motherhood**. In v25b we read: 'Stood near the cross was the mother of Jesus.'

As she stands at the foot of the cross Mary, the mother of Jesus (though John's Gospel never uses her name!) is experiencing the heartbreak of losing her son to a premature death. She is aware of the terrible pain that he is enduring and of the shame which belongs to this very public act of execution. She had lived with this fear ever since Simeon, the elderly priest at the Temple, had prophesied that a sword would pierce her own heart. And now as she faces this costly sacrifice, and embraces suffering and loss, Mary epitomises the reality of motherhood. To love a child as a mother does is to leave the heart and mind defenceless against whatever trouble or trauma that child might bring. Winifred Holtby, writing to her lifelong friend Vera Brittain said this:

'Babies are a nuisance. But so does everything seem to be that is worthwhile...husbands and books and committees and being loved and everything. We have to choose between barren ease and rich unrest...or rather one does not choose; life somehow chooses.'

The 'rich unrest' of motherhood stems from the fact that most mothers do what John 19 v25 tells us that Mary did on that dark Friday afternoon when Jesus was being done to death on the cross: she 'stood near'. Mary was near, attentive to every groan and heavy breath, to the straining of muscles and to the tearing of flesh as Jesus struggled to hold off the onset of death. She was near so she could dispel the awful loneliness of his dying. She was near because there was nowhere else she could dream of being knowing the pain and humiliation her son was going through. Hugh MacDiarmid in his poem, *The Two Parents*, begins by admitting his own sense of detachment towards his sick child and then compares it with the deep commitment and motherly love of his wife:

I love my little son, and yet when he was ill
I could not confine myself to his bedside.
I was impatient of his squalid little needs.
His laboured breathing and the fretful way he cried.
And longed for my wide range of interests again,
Whereas his mother sank without another care
To that dread level of nothing but life itself
And stayed day and night, till he was better, there.
Women may pretend, yet they always dismiss
Everything but mere being just like this.

Mary had descended to that 'dread level of nothing but life itself' as she stayed close to her dying son. And it is from this recognition of how much our mothers are willing to forego and sacrifice in order to be available to us that our deep sense of gratitude springs. As we grow up it gradually dawns on us how costly and selfless was the love our mothers bestowed on us; their quiet heroism and courage leaves us ever indebted to them.

The second insight we can glean from today's Gospel concerns **the reward of motherhood**. In v26 we read: 'When Jesus saw his mother he said to her, 'Woman here is your son.'

Knowing how devastated she would be by his imminent death Jesus provides for her through the care and companionship of the beloved disciple. Here is the love Jesus had received from his mother throughout his life being returned. He shows how much he understands her vulnerability and how deep runs his desire to ease her sense of loss.

And that must surely be the chief reward of motherhood – to receive back freely and joyfully and unsolicited the love of a child. What the mother has lavished on the child, all the values she has sought to teach him or her, all the sensitivity and care she has tried to nurture, has not been wasted. Instead it has borne fruit in the formation of a person who now shares those same values and exercises that same care. The love has become reciprocal and it flows in both directions between mother and child.

When my mother was a widow living alone in South Wales and I was serving a parish in York I knew one thing which brought her a lot of enjoyment was a hand-written letter. So every Thursday I sat at my desk and wrote a long letter to my mother. It was often hard to think of news because we had a weekly phone call lasting three-quarters of an hour in which I had updated her on all the latest happenings in our lives. But I knew when that envelope dropped through the letter-box on to her front door mat it would make her day. 'I got your letter – thanks very much!' would be one of her opening remarks on the phone next time we spoke. I'm sure you have similar stories of how you have recognised the humanity and vulnerability of your mother and acted to show her how much you loved and valued her. 'Seeing his mother' says John's Gospel, Jesus offered her the care of the beloved disciple. Likewise all of us need to 'see' our mothers in that way so that we can be sensitive to their need and help them experience and rejoice in the reward of motherhood.

The third insight to be found in these few verses from John 19 is what I want to call **the reach of motherhood**. Here is v27: 'Then Jesus said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.'

This shows the disciple at the foot of the cross acting in a motherly way towards Mary, the mother of Jesus. He made space for her in his home and committed himself to being responsible for her well-being. And in doing that the disciple was not showing motherly love to a member of his own family but to a woman who in one sense was a stranger. Her main claim on him was that Jesus had asked him to care for her. He had no legal or familial obligation to protect her or provide for her. The motherly love he showed her was a free gift inspired by his love of Jesus Christ. From this we can see how motherly love is freed from its family bond and made universal in its application.

Such love can be shown as much by men as by women and Jesus himself is the supreme example for all genders. 'The human character of Jesus ... combining the strength of manhood and the tenderness of womanhood in perfect alliance is always strengthening to contemplate and adore' wrote Bishop Charles Gore¹. We catch a glimpse of his motherly love as Jesus looks out over the city of Jerusalem: 'How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing!' I doubt that many hymns have been written on those words of Jesus but I did find one in a book called 'Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists' – just the kind of book Archdeacons read late at night! Here are a few verses:

Thou glorious hen
We stand before Thee
It is not only Jerusalem
That Thou lovest

So love us and hatch us
Thou glorious hen
We stand before Thee
Hen of Heaven.

O Lord bring it forth
This Ekuphakameni (paradise)
Like the hen
Loving her chickens

So the Church's focus on mothers and all they give to their families invites us to do more than express gratitude to them and to God. It challenges us as those who stand before the glorious 'Hen of Heaven', Jesus Christ, to respond to the desire he expressed over the city of Jerusalem and which he directed to the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross. It is the desire that we who are loyal and obedient to him should extend the power of motherly love into every part of our world, taking it much further than the bonds of kinship. Then that love can reach dark and troubled places like the city of Jerusalem. It can be released towards those individuals who are overwhelmed by pain and sorrow and loss like Mary. For as we spread that love to others we are helping build the Kingdom of God and becoming heralds of the salvation made available to us all in the cross of Jesus Christ. May this Mothering Sunday be very special for each and everyone of us and bring us all fresh inspiration. Amen.

¹ The Incarnation of the Son of God, Bampton Lectures 1891 page 3. A great read!