

'Behold thy Mother; behold thy Son'

A Sermon for Mothering Sunday, the 4th Sunday of Lent

This morning the Church observes not just one but three commemorations, namely the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Refreshment ('Laetere') Sunday and also Mothering Sunday. It seems eccentric that this should be so. Then there is that a rare liturgical colour, pink, setting the tone for a Lenten Sunday which provides an outburst of what in Latin is 'Laetere' or joy. In typical English fashion, today we keep the tradition of remembering and honouring our Mothers from days when servants, many of them older children or adolescents, were allowed this Sunday in Lent to return home to their mothers. If they worked in a big house, a kindly cook might well have baked Simnel Cakes as a seasonal offering for the servants to take to their mothers.

But where is all this taking us? The Church seems at first to have made things even more complicated by offering us a choice of two Gospel readings. One is Simeon's prediction to Mary that her child Jesus would suffer and that 'a sword would pierce her own soul'. The second Gospel takes us to the Cross and to the suffering Christ, who even from that place of agony encourages a new and future relationship between his beloved disciple John and his Mother, Mary, "Behold thy Son" and "Behold thy Mother".

As we begin to understand these Gospel accounts we find that they are complimentary and speak of all those things which Lent, Mothering Sunday and Refreshment Sunday express. And it is this: Any experience of a close and loving and committed relationship is at some time or another going to demand of us a costly love. The Gospel message swings between love as consolation and as desolation. Any mother or father or husband, wife or lover knows how painful it is to have to have to relinquish, to let go or to suffer the death of one who has been our life and our love. Such an experience strikes at the very heart of what we are. For parents this might commonly involve the son or the daughter who leaves home as a young adult and away from the childhood home, just like the Victorian child servant. Equally there are times when the young, having 'fled the nest' themselves feel homesick and very alone. For others in middle age there may come the death of a parent or parents. For some, the break-up of a past relationship continues to be painful and some of its effects do not seem to be relieved with the passing of time. For the elderly there are the many little and bigger losses that come with encroaching frailty and the loss of faculties once taken for granted, and of the deaths of contemporaries.

The two Gospels offered allow for an understanding of human loving which inevitably involves pain. But this is not to be the end of the matter. We are reminded that, even from the Cross, our Saviour Jesus Christ offers new life and proclaims aloud that even out of great sadness and death, the possibility of new relations and new understandings and new hope is embodied by the dying Saviour on the Cross. 'Behold thy Mother', 'Behold thy Son'. In the Cross life and death mixes and merges in the one sacrifice. In the same vein the prayer for the mixing of wine and water at the Eucharistic Offering outlines Christ's sacrifice for a deepening of trust in the outpouring of time with the healing of wounds. 'By the

mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity'. God's life and our lives and loves mix and merge in the one faith, the one hope and the one love. The message this morning is that we should not reject these things.

One great English mother, Mother Julian of Norwich sustains this theme as she observes that "The dear gracious hands of God our Mother are ever about us". The short-lived Pope John Paul I was to affirm that God was in a real sense our Mother as well as our Father. "God is our Father, but even more He is Mother" he said. It is when the love which holds our lives together is tested that faith is challenged to the uttermost. At such times do we embrace or neglect the love that God offers us? As a loving Father or indeed Mother God is everlastingly compassionate for us and for the establishment and the replenishment of the divine love in us. We are to come to God then, and not to go it alone. To come to him, as the servants journeyed out for the day to meet their mothers and to enjoy the communion of love, the 'laetere', the integrated life of love which Christ speaks to us on the Cross through the lives of his Mother, Mary and the beloved disciple, John. The Cross still beckons us at this time and we are being drawn inexorably toward it.

Thanks be to God.

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