

What's in a mother?

Mothering Sunday can be something of a mixed experience. Mothers gave birth to each and every one of us, no exceptions. But many of us no longer have our mothers living to buy a card or flowers for and walking past the rows of cards knowing that I no longer have a need for one still gives me a strange feeling. Many women suffer the sorrow of being unable to become mothers while others suffer from the loss of a child so that today can be a hard day to get through.

Motherhood comes in a number of forms, not simply biological. We may also be step mothers, mothers-in-law, adoptive mothers, foster mothers, surrogate mothers.

Our Old Testament reading from Exodus provides us with an excellent example of alternative mothering. Moses, a Hebrew baby is adopted by an Egyptian woman with a heart filled with compassion for a baby she understands is in mortal danger. A princess, Pharaoh's daughter she takes pity on the crying baby. Without her, Moses might never have grown up to be a prophet and lawgiver to his people, propelling their journey onwards at a crucial point in their survival. Pharaoh's daughter views the scene from a safe distance, giving directions, much in the same way as the women round the cross "stood at a distance".

Pharaoh's daughter knew exactly why the baby was in the bulrushes, her father's edict that all Hebrew male babies should be thrown into the river to die and yet she was prepared to deliberately go against that law to save the child, nurture and raise him as her own adoptive son.

Along with all the usual horrors that war in Ukraine has brought, it has also left thousands of surrogate mothers and their intended families in terrible difficulty, trying to maintain contact and arranging hazardous journeys where possible to safer countries for the pregnant women and for those babies being born so that they reach their intended families. Those unable to do so are being cared for, as best as can be in the circumstances, in basement nurseries.

Tom Wright, in his book, 'John for Everyone' comments that a colleague of his working in Lebanon during the late 20th century civil war, reported an interesting phenomenon which may help us to understand what happened at the foot of the cross. Rival militias were roaming the streets of Beirut. Men, armed to the teeth, were struggling for control of different streets and key buildings. No man dared venture out of doors unless heavily armed and preferably in a group or with some kind of protection.

But the women were free to come and go as they pleased. It was understood that they wouldn't be combatants; and also, one assumes, that they would need to do basic shopping, to keep families going even amid such civil unrest. A man was vulnerable to being attacked, kidnapped or killed. A woman was not.

This account may help to shed some light on the status of women in the early church. Acts chapter 8, verse 3 reports that women as well as men were the victims of persecution. "*Saul then worked for the total destruction of the Church; he went from house to house arresting both men and women and sending them to prison*" Clearly, they were perceived as a threat, just like the men. But at the time of Jesus' death this wasn't so. The disciples had all run away to hide. They didn't dare show their faces. But there was no problem with the women revealing, by their actions that they were part of Jesus' entourage. Nobody was going to bother arresting them.

The scene between Jesus and his mother has been the subject of many paintings and meditations through the centuries. Many churches have Mary and John (although we have no certainty that it was actually him) painted at the foot of the cross, on either side. At this moment she may well have recalled the words of Simeon (from Luke's Gospel 2.33-35) "*this child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too*".

But this moment, which is the last time we meet Jesus' mother in the gospel story, is full of pathos of its own. Cast your mind back to the wedding feast at Cana when Mary points out to Jesus that the wine had run out. She didn't understand then, that his time had not yet come, but she knew that the

way to get things done was to do whatever He said. She doesn't understand now, that his time has come at last; that this was where it was all leading; that his calling, to turn the water of human life into the rich wine of God's love, was now at last being fulfilled. The story of the water and the wine has more resonance with this scene. Jesus is thirsty and is offered low grade sour wine used by the soldiers. Jesus gave others the good wine, so good that it caused comment. But in this instance, in his moment of agony, he drank the cheap stuff.

"In Johannine thought, the Beloved Disciple can symbolise the Christian" (according to Bible commentator, Raymond Brown). If we hold that thought in our minds whilst reading John's Gospel, it may help us to look at this episode from the Passion with fresh eyes. The dying Christ commands us to treat the vulnerable (the widow and orphan are biblical archetypes) as members of our own family.

At the same time, he commands the vulnerable to do likewise with those who reach out to them. It's a lesson from the Passion to stop fixating on the physical suffering of Christ and the theological complexities of atonement. Perhaps if he had had breath and strength enough to emphasise the meaning of his command, he would have turned his eyes on us and said "go and do likewise".

So, as we go away to enjoy the sunshine and whatever plans have been made for the day, let's remember the different ways in which we can reach out to others who need our care and compassion, virtues we often associate with motherhood and as Paul wrote to the Colossians *"as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another.....forgive each other.....above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts....."*

Amen