

## Sermon for Mothering Sunday – 14th March 2010

The Fourth Sunday in Lent has often faced preachers and leaders of worship with a challenge. On the one hand it is, as its name suggests, part of the time of preparation for the days commemorating Christ's suffering and rising. As such, it shares with the Sundays around it a reflective, and not too exuberant, flavour. Lent is a serious time, a time when the demands of the Christian life loom large, as do the fallen state of humanity and the personal cost to Jesus of his coming among us. Yet on the other hand this is Mothering Sunday: a day when, at least in more recent tradition, we give thanks for the love and dedication of those who have borne and nurtured us and helped to make us who we are. At the end of today's service, flowers will be presented to all the mothers in the congregation (and, if we have enough to go round, to others too). That is, as a rule, a light-hearted and joyous moment: it's fun for the young people who hand the flowers out, and gratifying for those who receive them and know themselves loved in return for all they do.

Which emphasis, then, does the preacher place? The joy of a properly appreciated motherhood, or the discipline and sober realism of Lent? And this year, how should we fit Mothering Sunday into the series of sermons around the broad theme of suffering in human experience that we have made our Lenten topic?

The answer is that it is all too easy to combine motherhood and suffering. To be a mother – indeed to be an active and conscientious parent, male or female – brings with it at times pain, loss and disappointment. We hear, for example, about the torn feelings of many a woman on a reduced income, who loves the children she has, but whose heart sinks at the news that another is on the way. We need only open a newspaper to encounter the remarks of Denise Fergus, embittered years ago by the loss of her two-year-old son Jamie Bulger in a senseless and brutal murder. We know too how hurtful sons and daughters can sometimes be to their parents, taking emotional and material support for granted, then shaking off parental concern in their desire to spread their wings and be their own people.

But this paradox really should not surprise us. In an era when pain relief was unknown and child-bearing consequently an agonising risk, Jesus was quoted as saying 'When a woman is in labour she is sad, because her hour of suffering has come; but when the child is born she forgets her suffering, for joy that a child has been born into the world'. His take on this was the converse of what I have just been saying: he took the anguish for granted, but pointed out the positive from the mother's point of view. Mothers-to-be are, even today, frequently nervous about an approaching birth; yet that fear is often overlaid with excitement and pleasurable anticipation. They know that the love they feel for their partner, the baby's father, is about to take on a new and broader dimension as a relationship becomes a family. And when the

child is born, both parents' love for it can become the dominating focus of their lives: they respond to its smallness and delicacy with tenderness, to its needs with provision and protection, to its achievements with pride.

Love, however, does not cease to be a two-edged quality. In a broader context William Vanstone's hymn that we have just sung speaks of the open and the hidden sides of love: of God's love, which manifests itself in blessings and the good things we know of life yet conceals how much it drains its author, restricts freedom of action, and carries with it the risk of barely endurable pain. The Cross of Christ, the passion-event to which this season of Lent leads up, was the supreme act of love; yet no-one can imagine that such love did not come at a price.

I chose, therefore, two readings for this morning that show the Bible sources facing up squarely to the pain of parental love. Yet both show the suffering parent in a very positive light. For every child whose blood has raced with excitement at the story of the young David striding out to face Goliath, I am sure there has been an equal number of parental hearts wrenched at the thought of the ageing King, deceived, offended and threatened by his eldest surviving son, yet desperately anxious to see him disarmed and reconciled. Today's passage shows David in his most sympathetic light. Even better known is the story of Jesus' parents, taking their young son to Jerusalem for the age-old ritual of the firstborn, hearing on arrival strange and in part troubling prophecies about him, and the sting in the tail of Simeon's words to Mary, 'A sword will pierce your own soul too'; yet countless mothers have taken Mary as their forerunner, looking to her example to lend them strength through the difficult moments of their calling.

Not everyone sympathises with – or even grasps – the depth of parental feelings. For those less familiar with the story of David and Absalom, let me summarise briefly. The King was old: the triumphs over the Philistines were well behind him. The country was at peace but David had already learnt that it was not God's plan for him to crown his achievements by the building of a Temple. He had already had one sharp reminder of his fallibility, the disastrous mistake with Uriah the Hittite and Bathsheba. Yet despite losing his first child by her, David had one surviving son by her and other sons by other wives and Absalom, the eldest of these others, was his favourite and the chosen heir. The problem was that David had become what, in American presidential terms, is known as a lame duck: his days were numbered and ambitious people looked to the future: away from the King to the up-and-coming Crown Prince; and Absalom could not resist the flattery. Yielding to temptation to seize the crown before his time, Absalom secured the loyalty of key figures by promises and then allowed himself to be proclaimed Israel's new ruler. He seems to have simply forgotten the love and favour shown by his father, and how David had already forgiven him for other faults.

David fled from the capital. He did not renounce the throne; indeed he planted agents in Jerusalem and made plans to resume power with the aid of the loyal warrior, Joel. But his instructions to Joel were clear: 'Be gentle with Absalom. Do not hurt my son.' It was easy to see that magnanimity and a reconciliation were on the way, as soon as David had regained the upper hand. This, however, did not suit Joel. For reasons that the Books of Samuel never make wholly clear, Joel did not want to see the royal family united once more. Joel therefore saw to it that Absalom was, in fact, killed. The Bible paints the heartrending picture of David sending scouts constantly to look for news and asking every messenger who comes, 'Is all well with the young man Absalom?', and finally receiving the news he had been dreading, of his son's death. Even then Joel does not let David mourn freely: the passage we have just heard is followed by a description of how Joel rebukes David for his grief and persuades him that sorrow for Absalom looks like ingratitude to the soldiers who campaigned to regain David's crown.

Had queens ruled in the Israel of old, this story could just as well have been told of a mother. Regardless of gender, parents who love their children do not love conditionally. Forgiving faults, even to the point of what outsiders consider foolishness, is a typical parental trait. And so is being disappointed. It often takes maturity to realise fully what one's parents have done for one; yet in sad cases like Absalom's, true maturity is never reached. Hence Absalom saw only the restrictions that flowed from his father being King and not himself. If he knew the willingness of his father to go the extra mile, he saw this only as a weakness to be exploited.

But did David regret his affection for that wayward and disastrous son? We are certainly told nothing to suggest it. There is a saying, 'It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all', and that seems David's most likely take on things thereafter. Certainly Joel later received his come-uppance.

David's willingness to forgive Absalom and his longing for a reconciliation despite all that had happened are wholly inexplicable except for his love for his son. The love and the pain, or at least the risk of that pain, were two sides of the same coin. Precisely the same can be said of the New Testament experience of Mary, for whom Simeon's warning of a sword piercing her soul came only too true.

Mary loved her son. She rejoiced at his conception, she pondered the strange portents about his destiny, she looked for him when he went missing after that second Jerusalem visit, when he was found among the learned men and asked, perhaps rather disingenuously, 'Why did you come looking for me?' Her trust in him was so great that, when she got the seemingly abrupt reply at Cana in Galilee 'Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour is not yet come', she still told the attendants to follow Jesus' directions to the letter, and

so paved the way for the first miracle, the turning of water into wine. Despite being left behind when Jesus headed off on his preaching mission, she followed in time to be present at the foot of the Cross and watch him die.

Unlike Absalom, Jesus returned the parental love. We are only given two clues to that in the Gospels: first, we learn that after they returned to Nazareth from the episode in the Temple, Jesus 'was subject to' his parents. And secondly, we see his concern from the Cross for his mother, when he entrusted her to the keeping of his beloved John. That, though, with all else that we know of Jesus, is enough for us to deduce that he did indeed give her the answering love with which hopefully the majority of children repay their parents' devotion.

That made it all the harder, we may be sure, to face the loss of Jesus' love at his death. Mary probably had no more idea than any of the disciples that Jesus would be raised from death. So far as she was concerned, this was the end: she came to Golgotha to take leave, and to support Jesus by her presence as far as she could. Her mental suffering must have been appalling. Yet it is precisely in that suffering that the strength of her love was demonstrated. Love - and parental and filial love especially - does not flinch from the painful side of a relationship. One of my own students has recently lost his mother from cancer, and clearly they loved each other very much. His pain at losing her seems to have been almost equalled by hers at leaving him and his sister behind. The story of her passing is a very moving one, and it will take a long time for the wound of her loss to heal. But clearly there was a lot of love on both sides, right to the end and beyond: and I am quite sure that my friend would not think that time with his mother any less worth having on account of the grief of parting.

God - as all sermons should conclude - is like that. God is love, and love hurts. In the everyday care of their offspring, parents reflect the Creator's care for his world. In the ingratitude and disappointment we sometimes inflict upon our loved ones, we mirror what we in our careless moments do to God. In giving his son and experiencing his son suffer, God shared the experience of many bereaved mothers and fathers, from the parents of the Innocents murdered by Herod to the parents of soldiers lost in Afghanistan today. But in the love that is between Father and Son, the binding force of the Trinity, we see something totally essential to Godhead as we know it. The God we know would not be the God we know if he did not love. And there too, mothers and fathers echo the characteristics of God. It is indeed a high calling to be a parent. And we rightly thank and celebrate those who take it upon themselves.