

Mothering Sunday

Ruth 1:6-16 and John 2:1-11

Apart from the birth stories, more suited to Christmas celebrations than the 4th Sunday in Lent, there is very little in scripture about Mary – Jesus' mother.

There is the story of the boy Jesus going missing in Jerusalem – and Mary & Joseph only discovering this on their way home, and then only finding him after 3 days of searching. What anguish, what pain and emptiness – had she lost hope? Would she ever find him? Imagine – 3 days when your child is missing in a strange city. And then that enigmatic, almost dismissive response – didn't you know I would be in my father's house.

The reading today from John – where Jesus initially refuses to do what his mother asks, then decides otherwise (how typical of a son you might say)

And then the story of how she and her other children went to see Jesus and tried to speak to him. And Jesus looked to the crowd and said 'here are my mother and brothers'. A seeming rejection – one wonders how we would feel if one of our children said something like that. Almost saying this is no mother of mine.

And then the crucifixion. Mary is one of those at the cross. How painful to have lived through those days. To see your son arrested and mock trialed. To hear the sentence. To watch him struggle to carry his cross through the city and now to watch him suffering and dying. And how painful to hear his words to John – this is your mother, and the words to herself – this is your son. This time not a rejection, but an entrusting of her to John's care. Jesus's last act as her son

SO not much. But the one story We haven't mentioned is the one where Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the temple, and the wise Simeon and the prophetess Anna speak poignant words to her. For a moment Mary is lifted upwards in joy and, perhaps, pride as Simeon echoes Mary's own words – as in the Magnificat - about the child, and how he tells of the prophecy fulfilled. And then Simeon spoke the words 'And a sword will pierce your own soul too'.

You can imagine Mary's heart stop for a moment. What does he mean?

A sword will pierce your own soul.

What suffering, what pain, what lies in front of her?

This wasn't in the script from the angel – that was about the throne of David and the everlasting kingdom. How different would the Magnificat have been if she had known this then. We can only speculate.

So as the gospel story unfolds – the incident on the way home from the temple, the apparent rejection of Mary and his brothers and sisters and supremely the crucifixion - we can feel the sword piercing Mary's soul. We can feel her pain and suffering. We can perhaps begin to imagine her suffering

And those of us who are parents, perhaps especially those who are mothers, can probably relate to some of that suffering and pain. Maybe not to Mary's extent. But in the way our children make wrong decisions, perhaps hang around with the wrong people. How they bring shame upon us etc etc. How all too often parents love their children with a far deeper love than children love their parents.

And the way in extreme circumstances immense pain can be brought upon us.

I am sure we have all seen TV news clips where something terrible has happened to a child. A hit and run; an abduction; a senseless killing; a tragic death caused by illness. Whatever.

We look on and see the suffering in the mother's eyes and face. Often there is a press conference. Often the father will speak; forcing the tears back. But also, all too often the child's mother cannot find the words to say. Shocked, speechless overwhelmed by sadness and despair at the suffering caused.

Or we can see or maybe imagine the silent suffering of a mother whose child has committed some violent act – be that child 10 years old or 30 years old. How the

mixed emotions of love and total disbelief mingle together. Imagine the suffering going on in that woman's heart.

So suffering is all too often – to a greater or lesser extent – the lot of a mother.

I suppose when we are told we are going to have a child we would want to sing out for joy. To tell the world, to walk around with a smile on our face.

But, as the baby is born and begins to grow we begin to experience the other side of parenthood. Not just the sleepless nights, but also – in some way or another – the suffering, the piercing of the soul.

The other reading today is from the book of Ruth. And tells a story of dedication of a daughter (in law) to her mother in law. ***Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.***

We have the picture of love and commitment. Of the wonderful positive side of parenthood, especially motherhood. Of reciprocated love.

Ruth showing a love and commitment, demonstrating comfort and hope which can only come from God. Hope and comfort through whatever life might throw at Naomi. In appreciation of the love she has shown to Ruth. Ruth almost acting like a mother to Naomi. Showing the characteristics of motherhood

So we have glimpsed two aspects of motherhood/parenthood. Alongside the joys and pleasures and love and hope come the sufferings and the need to bring comfort in sufferings. Almost two sides of the same coin. To show the love that mothers show, to show the encouragement and comfort there has to be suffering. And that suffering can be the suffering of a child – which the mother/father takes on as their own, or it can be suffering or pain caused by the

child on the parent – perhaps purposefully, perhaps accidentally, perhaps by things done to them.

And now I want to briefly recall a passage of scripture - again from Luke's gospel, this time as Jesus looks over the city of Jerusalem.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (Luke 13:34 NIV)

Jesus wanting to bring comfort and hope to a city that is causing him pain and suffering. Jesus wanting to compare his feelings with those of a mother.

As a hen gathers her chicks.

You have probably heard the story of the fire in the farmyard. Devastation all around. Building burned. Animals killed. And when the fire was over the farmer discovered the charred corpse of a hen. And in desperation he kicked the corpse and was amazed to see 3 chicks scurry from under it. Protected from the flames by their mother who gave her life. As a hen gathers her chicks ..

And I hope for you, you can recall your own mother and/or father and see this in them and thank God for them. Perhaps you can see it in your children as they start on the parental journey. Pray for them and thank God for them. Perhaps you can see something of it in yourself.

But of course, it may not be like this for you. Perhaps your memories of your mother or father are painful. Perhaps you can't even bear to think about it. We

hear all too often of abuse or neglect in the home, or maybe even more often of dysfunctional parents who seem unable to bring the love and care we would hope for.

And if that's your story, then I am sorry, and I hope you can see that there are good examples of motherhood, and that it doesn't have to be as it was for you. And I hope that for you and for your children if you have any it will be different. I hope that you can see and perhaps become examples of love and self sacrifice that more reflect the image Jesus presents of the mother hen.

Or perhaps there are other reasons why Mothering Sunday is painful and hard for you – absence, memories, past sadnesses or tragedies etc

But I hope too that you can bring the pain and the suffering that this has caused you to Jesus and accept from him the comfort, the hope and the encouragement that he offers.

SO to finish.

We see comfort and suffering intertwined. How the god who brings comfort suffers with us. How in our suffering we can bring comfort to others. And how sometimes there seems to be no comfort.

But recall the story of the mother hen. The example of Jesus who suffered to comfort us.

And the promise of God to bring us comfort. – as illustrated in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 33:26-28

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.