

Lent 4, Mothering Sunday

14.03.21

May I speak in the name of God, who is Mother/Father, Christ & Holy Spirit. Amen.

This year, I am reading the gospel of Luke as one of my Lenten disciplines. As I was reading chapter 7 the other day, I came across Jesus' interaction with the widow of Nain. Luke describes it in this way:

'As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town.'

The story continues:

'When the Lord saw her, *he had compassion for her* and said to her, 'Do not weep.'

But it is after Jesus has healed the man that we hear what to me are such poignant words:

'Jesus gave him to his mother.'

I found the tenderness of that piece so touching and it reminded me of today's gospel reading, in which Jesus gives his mother to the beloved disciple and the beloved disciple to his mother.

It struck me that Jesus must have received some good mothering from Mary in order to feel such compassion for the mothers in his midst.

And it occurred to me, too, that actually Jesus, as fully divine as well as fully human, would know deeply the cost of fathering *and* mothering as a part of the Trinity whom we know as Spirit, Word and Father/Mother.

As I pondered this mothering, I reflected on our current situation as we approach the year marker of COVID-19. I thought of the many people who are, after almost a year of life in a pandemic and lockdowns, tired out, weary, bloodied. I know that for some, COVID has been a fruitful time and not unduly stressful. But for others, this year has been a gruelling one, a year in which they have been at war, albeit with a virus.

Some have been fighting the virus itself, either within their own bodies, or as NHS, care workers and family carers looking after other people. Others have been fighting with depression, with financial hardship or with loneliness, especially those living alone. Some young people and children have been fighting with increased anxiety about school, or not school, or not knowing whether there will be school or exams or not.

Of course, there are so many more examples I could give, but my point is just in noticing how many people are battle weary and in need of nurture and rest.

In the midst of this battlefield, I wondered where we might find rest or healing or nourishment, where we could turn for some of that good mothering? Of course there is Mary, mother of the church, the young woman whose strength of character changed life for everyone, the woman called to mother the divine. Many of you will have heard me talk about the mothering of Mary, available for *all of us*.

But on *this* Mothering Sunday, I thought, who better to turn to than Mother God?

This might seem a strange concept given that we are a part of the patriarchal Judaeo-Christian tradition, with very little expression of the feminine. Still, it is good to remember that whilst the bible uses, for the most part, masculine language about God, images of God as mother are not absent from its pages.

In the book of Hosea (11.3-4), God says:

‘Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I who took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.’

Or in Deuteronomy (32.18) we hear:

‘You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.’

In Isaiah (42.14), God says:

‘For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept myself still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant.’

And later on (66.13):

‘As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.’

Jesus, as we know, compares himself with a mother hen, saying to Jerusalem (Mtt 23.37):

‘How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’

God as mother might not be prominent, but she is not absent.

The mediaeval mystic, Julian of Norwich, is renowned for her understanding of God as mother as well as father. Another mediaeval mystic, Meister Eckhart, says this:

‘What does God do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth.’

What a glorious image of God and the constant birthing of creation.

For some, this image of God as Mother is a delight and joy; it is freedom and liberation and balance.

As you know, it has been a passion for me since I first discovered Feminist Theology 20 years ago. I long for the day when my daughter, along with *all* girls and women, can sing and cry out to God as ‘She’ without fear of ridicule or anger and with the full encouragement and participation of the church.

For others, though, the image of God as Mother might feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable, an understandable challenge for anyone brought up within a patriarchal framework. If you should feel yourself in this place, whatever your gender, I invite you simply to explore.

What might God as Mother look like to you? What art or images would resonate with you? What poetry or music would help you to hear her voice? How would you wish to pray to her? What would you choose to pray with – a candle, water, flowers or something else?

In this place of pandemic weariness, I wonder what it would feel like to rest in the nurturing, healing and nourishing arms of *Mother* God,

to imagine ourselves held oh so tenderly, to listen as she whispers sweet nothings or sings us a lullaby?

This is not to suggest that there is only gentleness and not strength or determination within the feminine: we only need to think of Mary's 'yes' and her vigil at the foot of the cross or Jochebed and Miriam to see that strength and determination, but it is, for now, to rest in the presence of the God who, in the words of Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Hosea, gave us birth, taught us to walk, carried us in her arms, bent down to feed us, comforted us, comforts us still.

Inevitably, when we talk of God as mother *or* father, there is a particular challenge for anyone who experienced a difficult relationship with their *own* mother or father. If that is part of your experience, I wonder whether a possible starting point might be to ponder what it is you would have *wished* for in a mother, what it is you wish you had experienced or known or been told?

And perhaps also in this place, and for *anyone* exploring this concept of God as Mother, we might also be attuned to the ways in which we can mother ourselves. I first came across this concept of self-mothering in more depth in my Pre and Peri-Natal work and it means, simply put, to treat ourselves with mercy and kindness.

Most of us find it easy to be hard on ourselves, to push ourselves, to tell ourselves not to be silly or make a fuss, to put ourselves down, to be frustrated with ourselves or impatient with our progress.

Perhaps this Mothering Sunday could be an opportunity to explore new ways of being with ourselves, to talk to ourselves as we would a friend or a child in need of comfort, to honour our boundaries, to tend to our needs, to slow down and give ourselves space and, above all, to show ourselves love and compassion.

'As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you,' says God. Can we show ourselves that same tenderness?

This Mothering Sunday, as we chalk up a year of pandemic life, with all that entails, may we find comfort in Mary, our mother. May we also learn to mother ourselves, to offer ourselves the mercy and kindness we are called to show others.

And may we rest deeply in the arms of Mother God, wellspring of love, healing and creativity, that, as our strength grows, we may dance and sing our way with her to renewed hope, purpose and the joy of resurrection.

Amen.