

JOHN 19.25-27: A CHALLENGE TO CARE

[Chelmsford 22 March 2009]

The Jews have a lovely proverb "*God could not be everywhere and therefore he made mothers*".

Many of us would feel like saying "Amen" to that, for we have been blessed with good mothers - mothers who from our earliest days have showered us with love.

Yet sadly there are perhaps some here who feel let down by their mothers.

Mothers who failed to love, failed to give the time, the attention, the security we needed

There is a good deal of wisdom in the comment of one American journalist who wrote:

"The commonest fallacy among women is believing that simply having children makes one a mother - which is as absurd as believing that having a piano makes one a musician"

In the context of Mothers Day I want to look at the relationship which Mary and Jesus enjoyed with one another, and see what we can learn.

John wrote in his account of the crucifixion: **"Standing close to Jesus' cross were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, 'He is your son'. Then he said to the disciple, 'She is your mother'. From that time the disciple took her to live in his own home"** (Jn 19.25-27).

Here we see three things:

1. MARY CARED FOR HER SON

Every young mother thinks her child is special.

There is no other child as beautiful or as clever as her child.

There is, e.g. no ugly child in a maternity unit. The wards are filled with the most beautiful babies imaginable.

What's more these beautiful babies are incredibly clever. At that stage in life every child is deemed a little Einstein. It's only when they start school that the truth begins to dawn.

But *for Mary her son was even more special.*

The angel Gabriel had told her that he would be called "**the Son of the Most High God**" and that "**the Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was**" (Lk 1.32).

To her had been given the privilege of being the mother of the Messiah.

It must then have been with great pride that Mary watched her son grow up.

And yet Mary discovered to her cost that *being a mother is not easy.*

Here I don't have in mind the quip: "*A mother's role is to deliver children obstetrically once, and by car for ever after*"

I am thinking rather of the occasion when as a 12-year-old Jesus went missing for three days. Just think of the agony Mary went through.

Just think of how you would feel if your child went missing for three whole days.

Fortunately the missing child was found - he was found in the Temple discussing issues with teachers of the law. "My son", said Mary, "**why have done this to us? Your father and I have been terribly worried trying to find you**". To her bewilderment Jesus replied you: "**Why did you have to look for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?**" (Lk 2.48-49).

It couldn't have been easy being a mother to Jesus.

A few years later came *the time for Jesus to marry* - or at least, that would have been the expectation in that culture.

For with few exceptions it was obligatory for all Jewish men to marry and father children. If they failed to do so, they were accused of "*slaying their seed*".

As a healthy, wholesome, & in all probability very personable young man, there could have been a good many mothers in Nazareth & beyond who coveted him as a son-in-law. In those days parents normally involved themselves in finding husbands or wives for their children. Mary would have been expected to have been looking around for a suitable marriage partner for her son.

Instead, she may have had to explain to Jesus that sometimes a special call from God precluded marriage.

It could not have been easy for Mary to have had her son living at home in his twenties, still single.

The day finally came when *Jesus left home*.

Mary no doubt looked forward to the day when Jesus embarked upon his ministry.

But what a *disappointment* he proved.

- Right from the very beginning Jesus got mixed up with the wrong sort of people. He made friends with tax collectors whose dishonesty was legendary. He attracted to himself prostitutes and other dubious characters.
- True, Mary must have been thrilled by the way in which the crowds initially flocked to Jesus. What mother would not have been proud of a son who taught & healed like Jesus. But after three years his ministry seemed to end in disaster.

Here at the age of 33 her son was ending his life on a cross

For a Jew there was no more *shameful* way than to die on a cross.

Despite the modesty of paintings and crucifixes, men were in fact crucified naked.

Whereas Greeks were not at all embarrassed by the naked body, Jews found the exposure of the body most shameful.

Of course Mary had seen her son naked before - why she had washed him as a baby in his birthday suit. But now his nakedness was displayed for all to see

For Mary shame must have been mixed with *bewilderment*.

Had not the angel told her that her Son was to be the Messiah?

Mary in the Magnificat had thought this involved bringing the powerful down from their thrones (Lk 1.52). But as it was the powerful had brought down her son.

Where was God in all this?

And of course there was the *pain* of it all.

Here I have in mind not the pain of crucifixion, nor even the pain of seeing your child experiencing pain, but rather the pain of seeing one's child die before one's eyes.

It just should not be. We should die before our children.

What *anguish* must have been hers.

33 years previously Mary had sung: "**My heart praises the Lord; my soul is glad because of God my Saviour**" (Lk 1.46). Now, if she had sung at all, she would have declared: "**My heart is in pain before the Lord, my soul is in anguish because of God my deceiver**".

Simeon had warned her that a sword would pierce her soul - and how right he was (Lk 2.34).

One might have thought that everything might have been too much for Mary.

We could perhaps understand if she had kept away from all that was happening.

BUT, as it was Mary was there - she was "**standing close to Jesus' cross**".

Mary did not stay at home on that dreadful day, rather she was there.

I wish to suggest that in standing close to the cross, she was in fact *standing by* her son. She may not have understood him - she may not even have approved of the stance he had taken - but nonetheless, she was prepared to stand by him, come what may.

Jesus might have been a criminal in the eyes of the law, but as far as she was concerned, he was still her son. *Mary reflected true motherhood.*

I'm sure that by "**standing close to Jesus' cross**" Mary actually brought some *comfort* to her son in his final agony.

It doesn't seem she said anything. But that didn't matter. In times of trouble it's not words which count, it's being there which counts.

Mary stood close to the cross - Mary stood by her son in his darkest hour - and in standing by her son Mary actually sets an example to us all.

Nothing saddens me more when I hear of mothers (or fathers for that matter) failing to stand by their children. It may be that our children are in the wrong - it may be that they have tested our patience to breaking point - but surely motherhood/parenthood is all about standing by our children come hell or high water.

Mary cared for her child - right to the very end. So too should we - however difficult our children may prove!

2. JESUS CARED FOR HIS MOTHER

There are some who suggest that Jesus did anything but care for his mother.

The agnostic AN Wilson in his life of *Jesus* wrote: "*At the beginning of his public life, Jesus appears to have been in a state of conflict with his family. His recorded utterances about the family as an institution are all hostile to it*"

There is some truth in this statement.

There is no doubt that as far as Jesus was concerned, *God always takes precedence over the family*. As one preacher put it, 'Jesus creates havoc in the family' (Willimon).

- E.g. on one occasion, when Mary & his brothers sent a message asking for Jesus to come and see them, Jesus said to the crowd he was teaching: **"Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?.... Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother"** (Mk 3.31-35)
- On another occasion, a would-be disciple said to Jesus: **"I will follow you, sir; but first let me go and say good-bye to my family"**. And Jesus replied: **"Anyone who starts to plough and then keeps looking back is of no use to the Kingdom of God"** (Lk 9.61.62)

Unlike Judaism, Christianity is not a religion of the family.
God – and not the family – comes first.

And yet ***Jesus did not write off family relationships***

He accepted that there are family responsibilities and obligations

- On one occasion, e.g. he attacked the Pharisees for withholding financial support from their parents on spurious religious grounds (Mk 7.11-13)
- A likely reason why Jesus did not begin his ministry until the age of 30, was that Joseph may have died at a relatively early stage in life and that therefore Jesus needed to stay at home and support his mother until his siblings were off her hands.

Certainly here at the Cross we see Jesus caring for his Mother

"Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, 'He is your son'. Then he said to the disciple, 'She is your mother'"

This care for his mother is all the more remarkable considering the *pain* in which Jesus must have been.

All too often when we're in pain we become self-absorbed & forget the needs of others. I have found in my visiting, that some sick people are just not interested in the wider world outside. They don't want to hear news of the church. They only want to talk about themselves and their symptoms.

But not Jesus. Jesus did not allow his pain to cut him off from the needs of others.

Jesus was concerned to ensure that when he was gone there was somebody who would care for his mother.

Here too is ***a challenge for us to care for our parents.***

Sadly, it's all too easy for the younger generation to ignore the needs of the older generation. It's all too easy for the younger generation to become absorbed in their own needs and the needs of their children, to forget the needs of those who brought them into the world.

The fact is that the command to honour parents applies not just to teenagers, but to adults in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and even older!

But the obligation to care goes beyond parents - we are to care for one another.

3. MARY AND JOHN WERE TO CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER

This seems to me to be the prime lesson of the words "**He is your son**" & "**She is your mother**". These 2 statements reflect the need of a *mutuality* of care.

Strangely, down through the centuries Roman Catholic exegesis has interpreted the word of Jesus from the Cross differently.

Traditionally RCs have interpreted the clause "**He is your son**" in terms of the disciple coming under the care of Mary. This led to the belief that Mary was appointed the mother, not only of the Beloved Disciple, but of all disciples, hence of the Church too. Mary, it is said, now becomes the new Eve, Lady Zion, and the Mother of all who believe!

But if anything it is not the disciple who was being entrusted into the care of Mary, but rather Mary who was being entrusted into the care of the disciple. And so we read "**From that time the disciple took her to live in his own home**".

The clear impression is that from that moment Mary became a member of the beloved disciple's family. Or did she?

I like the suggestion that from that moment *Mary became a member of an even bigger family*. Jesus in entrusting Mary to the Beloved Disciple, was in fact entrusting her into the care of the wider family of God.

In one sense, at the Cross Mary ceased to be the mother of Jesus.

She transferred from one nuclear family into a wider family, where she has countless sons and daughters, sisters and brothers to look after her.

Yes, the church is a family in which we are all to care for one another.

Indeed, if Jesus is right, the family of the church is of far greater importance than those nuclear families in which we find ourselves as a result of an accident of birth.

On this Mothering Sunday, when we thank our mothers for all that they have meant to us, let's not forget that there is a wider family to which we belong.

For some Mothering Sunday can be a sad day - it is a day when they become conscious of how things have gone wrong in their lives - it is a day when some become conscious of their isolation from others. If this is how you feel, let me remind you that there is a bigger and more important family to which you belong - a family in which we all can feel ourselves loved and affirmed.

To the members of this new family Jesus said: "**I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another**" (John 13.34)

Paul writing to the church at Corinth states that in the body of Christ all the members should have "**the same concern [care] for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness**" (1 Cor 12.25,26)

In this family we are called to care for one another

- With our text in mind, let's not forget that this means that we are called to care not least for the widows and indeed for all who have been bereaved
- Likewise we are called to care for younger members of the church, and especially for those who may seem to be going off the rails

Indeed, we are called to care for all.