

Mothering Sunday 2009

Luke 2.33-35

Holy Mothers

On my journeys between here and the house we own in Liverpool, I pass through the eastern part of Huyton. The road goes very near McGoldrick Park, a pleasant area of mixed housing with leafy trees. As I pass by, I often think about and pray for Anthony Walker, a black teenager who died in that park a few years ago, the victim of a brutal racist attack. His 'crime' was to have a white girlfriend. Anthony had a remarkable mother, a deep Christian lady of Baptist and black Pentecostal background. She immediately understood that her faithful Christian response was to pray for the forgiveness of her son's killers, and even more remarkably, to forgive them herself. I find myself wondering whether I would be able to respond in such a Christian way in a similar situation.

A few miles to the north lies the Anglican parish of St Cuthbert's, West Derby. A few yards away from the church is the Fir Tree pub. In the parking area of the pub eighteen months ago, a young lad, Rhys Jones, lay dying in his mother's arms, an innocent victim caught in the crossfire of a vicious gang dispute. Rhys's parents are also remarkable people, but still struggling to come to terms with their son's death.

Two remarkable mothers whom we could well think and pray about today, Mothering Sunday. I would like to mention a third mother, one who comes to us in our Gospel Reading this morning. It is of course the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Simeon's Words to Mary

The reading took us back to that moment when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem. It is the end of Mary's time of purification forty days after the birth of our Lord Jesus. It is time for her to offer a sacrifice for her purification, and time also for the naming of her son. They are met by old Simeon, who has waited many years for the coming of the Messiah to the temple, and this is the moment. His life is fulfilled; so he offers to God the prayer we know as the *Nunc Dimittis*: *Lord, now you let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled.....*

Joyful words they are, which celebrate the fulfilment of God's promise. But then the tone changes – Simeon's next words are sombre, serious, and full of foreboding. He says to Mary:

Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.

Simeon sees, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus will soon come into conflict with the religious authorities in Jerusalem, and will be a sign of God's judgement. But let's focus for a moment of Simeon's words to Mary: *a sword will pierce your own soul also*. These words foretell the suffering of Mary, as in due course she will have to watch her Son embark on that dangerous vocation that will take him eventually to the cross of Calvary. We can cast our minds forward in the story perhaps, when in St John's gospel, as we shall hear in the hour of the Passion on Good Friday afternoon, Mary stands at the foot of the cross of Jesus, with the beloved disciple, a silent witness to the death of her Son; struggling perhaps to

reconcile within herself a mother's feelings with the acceptance that somehow in all this suffering God's will is being accomplished.

Today, on Mothering Sunday, I would like us to reflect for a few moments, on the calling, the vocation, of women in general and mothers in particular. The mothers of Anthony Walker and Rhys Jones give us powerful images of a suffering, painful love. Mary the mother of Jesus gives us the image of a mother's love wounded by her own Son's following of his calling to die for the salvation of the world. It is a suffering love too.

To this we could add the suffering of millions of women; for example, the women of Bosnia and Darfur suffering sexual violence at the hands of men; the women living under Taleban rule in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, denied education, work, and confined to their houses, liable to be cast off at will by their husbands.

Mothering Sunday

Perhaps this is too sorrowful a subject for Mothering Sunday. But let's face up to the reality that there is something in the DNA of men that often makes them warriors, while there is something in the DNA of women that calls them to nurture and to reconcile, with that same suffering love. So often in our world it is the women who suffer the consequences of men at war, and then have to pick up the pieces and try to mend things when the fighting is over.

Women bear the cost of so much. Anthony Walker's mother; Rhys Jones mother; Mary the mother of Jesus. As we think about this, I am sure some of you women here this morning will have remembered times of suffering love the raising of your children. On this Mothering Sunday, I would encourage you to have in your mind's eye Mary standing at the foot of the cross, her heart breaking, yet knowing that her Son fulfils God's call, as indeed Mary was faithfully fulfilling God's call to her. Suffering love indeed. But our Christian faith leads us this Easter truth: that at the end of the road of faithful suffering, lies victory and healing, and always a new beginning, in that risen life that is revealed to us on Easter morning.

Thankful Hearts

On Saturday, we are having a Gift Day, despite the fact that times are hard. It ties into Mothering Sunday, as we think about that other Mother who has nurtured us through our lives, our Mother Church. As I wrote in the leaflet you all have been giving out, our gifts will reflect hearts that are gladly thankful for all that God has done for us; for the blessings of our lives – but also, hearts that are thankful for those times of our lives which have been dark and painful, times of real suffering; times when it has been hard to hang on to our faith, but times when our Lord has walked with us, bearing our weight on his cross.

So today, let us pray for all those women who suffer. Let us offer to God our own experiences of suffering. Let us pray for the same grace of God that the Virgin Mary knew at the foot of the cross. Long ago, a great English saint we know as Mother Julian of Norwich received some words from God, even as the Black Death was decimating the population around her. The words were these: *All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*

Today, let us be thankful. For God is good, and loves mankind.

Revd Stephen Gough 22/03/09