

Mothering Sunday Lent 4 March 6th 2016

Waiting for Kate to deliver

I'm distracted to say the least knowing that my wife, Kate, is about to give birth at any moment. We're in a waiting game and we have hopes and fears of course. We know roughly the story line we imagine but not knowing whether it's a boy or girl is exciting and really annoying too. Waiting for deliverance can be frustrating, wondering what the future will bring is daunting and thrilling too.

Royal Navy School

I've been watching the documentary about Raleigh the Royal Navy Training base near Dartmoor and this week featured a 21-year-old who messed up an exercise on the moor and had to be helped back to base. The disappointment at her failure was quite moving. But, she got through the training and her ordeal was formational, transformative. Struggle and hardship develop character whereas, 'All sunshine makes deserts'.

Good and bad mothers and fathers

The idea of motherhood is loaded with emotion and we each have a unique experience, some of us had a close relationship, some of us none at all and everything in between. Like other festivals for some it is a time of celebration and thanksgiving, for others a time of regret, sorrow even pain. In a similar way some people have not known a good father figure or male role model and so it's especially important that we realize that although God is referred to as He, all the qualities of humankind are met in the person of God. Recently we heard Jesus describe himself as a hen longing to gather the people of Jerusalem under his wing like chicks. Elsewhere in the bible god is referred to as: a protective mother eagle (Deut 32:10-11), a fierce mother bear (Hosea 13:8), a mother giving birth (Isa 42:14) and breast-feeding her child (Isa 49:15). How does that alter your view of God?

When we pray Our Father some people find that difficult. If we think of Jesus and his revolutionary approach to women perhaps we find it easier to discover just how inclusive and ground breaking was his ministry. Jesus broke the rules by openly talking to women whether they were Jews or Gentiles.

Male only disciples

Jesus chose male disciples because women had no public voice back then and could not have carried out the role needed at the time. No-one would have listened. Yet mothers are revered so highly in Jewish culture that the very bloodline determining one's Jewishness traces the mother's line not the father's. Also, Priscilla was a wealthy cloth trader and bank rolled much of Jesus' ministry. Let's face it, the women stayed with Jesus to the bitter end at the cross – we aren't told what happened to most of the disciples?

[Christian Aid video of Morsheda]

All creation groans

Standing back from the literal role of mother and thinking then about what it means for us – all creation groans with birth pangs as we still reel from the consequences of living in a fallen world. It's as though all of us are living between Good Friday, where Jesus completed the salvific work of freeing us from the ravages of sin and death and the full resolution of the plan, which is resurrection power over struggling and evil at Easter Day. It's as though we're all caught up in Easter Saturday – we live as though awaiting deliverance from our present troubles.

Deliverance from struggle and birthing new beginnings

The bible is packed with references to struggle, overcoming struggle and being delivered from it. The problem is so often that God like a mid-wife keeps assisting the birth of new beginnings, a fresh start, freedom liberation from the waiting, the wrestling. We make promises and claims that if only – yet we mess it up all over again, don't we?

We live with the myth

that at some point all will be well in this lifetime – and yet it never is quite, is it? This is not helped by the constant diet of consumerism feeding our dissatisfaction. Yet Julian of Norwich, (incidentally a woman despite her name) prays that 'All will Be Well'. However, this might not be within our lifetime. We live with disappointment and frustration and sooner or later, something will happen to burst our bubble.

We meet therefore to support and encourage and share in one another's ups and downs, we gather to walk, to journey together through good times and bad and in it all – like Hannah and Mary and Elizabeth and Esther and Ruth and Priscilla. Recently we spoke about the courage to speak truth into situations, now we find that the faith of Hannah helps her persist with her request to God and to Eli for a child of her own.

Hymn of praise

In the second chapter of 1 Samuel Hannah praises God for hearing her prayer and answering her and her hymn of praise echoes in the Magnificat which Mary the Mother of Jesus sings in response to the revelation that she will bear the saviour of the world. [Ask someone to read out Hannah 2 Hymn of Praise]

What impression of God as parent do you have?

Are you scared to respond to God's call upon your life – is that because you're afraid he'll ask you to do the impossible and then scold you for failing? God desires a humble and contrite heart and in our weakness he is strong. If God were to ask me to give birth, would that be reasonable? It would certainly be miraculous, but what sort of parent would it make God out to be?

Building up spiritual muscle.

If I were to ask some of you to knit a cardigan for the baby by next weekend – how would you get on? Perhaps well, but not all of us I suspect? Dave – how's your crochet skills?
[Visual Aid of new born cardigan]

God doesn't ask the impossible of us, but He does stretch us, test us. Like building up our spiritual muscles He gives us more demanding roles to develop our spiritual gifts. If we don't use our spiritual muscle, we become flabby weak and lethargic. God wants us to grown up to become mature to parent and nurture and disciple those younger in the faith. We are to crave spiritual meat not stay on a diet of formula milk.

Henri Nouwen said in his book on the Prodigal Son how he longed for a spiritual father in the faith to nurture him and give him strength for the journey ahead. This never happened. Then he felt God say, 'I want you to be a spiritual father to someone else'.

How might God be testing you at present and asking you to stretch yourself spiritually?

Here's some questions for you to ponder? What might God be testing you in right now? Perhaps like Hannah you need to commit to giving up something precious in order to find the way ahead. Here's the paradox, the contradiction, by giving up our lives, our self-centered me first habits, we do in fact find ourselves. As we take up our cross daily, the struggle to live Christ's way not our own, we do in fact realize that we become the person God wants us to be, and in so doing discover deep joy and great satisfaction. Who could you accompany on their spiritual journey?

The responsibility to disciple others

to provide them spiritual guidance is the duty of everyone here. You might say I'm not up to the task – God says, you're further ahead in your journey of faith than someone else you must be. We're all here in a hospital, people who need healing from our brokenness but the fact that we recognize this is a step towards God. You're further down the narrow path than some who dare not even set foot in this building. Could your gift this Mothering Sunday be to offer someone the love of God, to introduce someone to the feminine qualities of the Almighty? What kind of father perhaps or male role model could you be to someone?

Giving away in order to gain

Hannah gave her son to Eli in the worship capital called Shiloh, long before the temple in Jerusalem was constructed. Mary lost her son Jesus but God brought him back to life that we might all be free, Abraham was prepared to sacrifice His son out of obedience to God and a ram was provided at the last minute as a scapegoat. God lost his people time again to temptation and destruction because they would not trust Him, God gave up His one and only Son that we might triumph in the struggle and victory over sin and death. What might you gain by giving something away for God's sake?

Mothers have a unique role

in our society and we celebrate all that they do today. We give thanks to God for our own mothers whether or not we had a good relationship with them. We give thanks for all those who for the sake of others give up something precious – their time, their children, their lives

for the sake of others. For all those who persevere in the face of adversity we ask your strength and comfort and remember that you promise to be with us all in green pastures and through the valley of the shadow of death – when I rise and when I sleep you are there Lord God.

Thank you for the role models like Hannah we see in scriptures. Thank you Lord for Jesus our gathering hen. Thank you God for being a protective mother eagle, a fierce mother bear, and like a mother giving birth to creation itself and to all of us. Amen