



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 15th August 2021

Readings: Revelation 12.1-5a; Luke 1.46-55

For over 30 years, *Cambridge Voices* has been in Paris on this date. 15th August finds many churches thinking of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some focus upon her death, believing she was assumed into heaven, ‘falling asleep’ with the unparalleled distinction of being the mother of God, *Theotokos*, which means something like God-bearer. These ideas being absent from the Bible, few Protestant Christians give them attention, but 15th August remains one of the days of the year – alongside those at Advent, Christmas and the Annunciation - when Mary might be thoughtfully and gratefully recalled.

Today my thoughts of Mary focus upon her as a mother thinking about her son. After all, parents’ connection to their children is frequently the most intense relationship they know. What has it been like to be the parent of an Olympian these past few weeks, whether or not they won any medals? What are the feelings of parents now that their children’s public exam results have been announced – some glowing with reflected pride, others learning to live with disappointment? How consuming is the experience of a parent as they watch their child explore who they are becoming in identity and vocation, in politics and religion, some rejoicing in their offspring, others despairing? What is it to be a parent walking beside a child enduring mental torment, inconsolable sadness, or terminal illness? And what is it to be a parent who feels so desperately the need to seek asylum that they will leave work and nation, home, and children in search of something better to prepare for them in another country?

As the Gospel writers write of Mary, we’re presented with a parent who seems familiar with the intensity that characterises all those places. Early in Luke, we encounter a teenager contemplating the news of her unanticipated pregnancy, and unsure how to tell Joseph, her espoused. Months later, she’s a new mother, cradling her ever-so vulnerable infant. A decade on, she’s wondering where her wandering twelve-year-old has gone. Into his adulthood, and reading a little between the lines, might there be intimations of Mary wishing her 30-year-old would stick to carpentry? Or does she watch him preaching, teaching, healing, and feel a swelling bosom of parental pride? All too soon, though, she is watching him feted by some and vilified by others. And then, standing at the foot of the cross, Simeon’s prescient word is fulfilled as the very sword that pierces Jesus’s side, also pierces Mary’s soul.¹ And finally, artists have depicted the *pieta*, with the grieving mother once more cradling her son’s limp and helpless form.

Yes, Mary knows the full gamut of parenting’s roller coaster that so many of us do. So it is that those same Scriptures reflect her paeon of praise – what we have come to call Magnificat, after its opening words on Latin. But not only so. Alongside praise there’s her piety – Luke also tells of her quietness, ‘treasuring all these things [as she] pondered them in her heart’,² and shedding the inconsolable tears of a mother losing her firstborn.

How does this help us in our experience of life? If ministry has taught me anything, it is that the stuff Mary endured – *all* the stuff Mary endured - goes on behind the front doors of most of us. So I close with three simple ideas that emerge from what we glean of her in the Gospels.

First, the very act of praising is transformative. Of course, praise can well up in us unbidden. Awe at the sunset, pride in the loved-one’s achievement, gratitude for the neighbour’s kindness. But praise

¹ Luke 2.35

² Luke 2.19

is also a discipline. Sometimes it is in the very act of persuading ourselves to praise that equilibrium is restored. Remember with me, if you will, the funeral of Olive Darke. Such was her humility that she asked for very little by way of tribute. Just one aria from a Bach cantata, in fact. The second movement of BWV 68 bubbles along with a vibrant violoncello part accompanying a treble as they warble forth: *'My heart ever faithful, sing praises, be joyful. Away with complaining, faith ever maintaining'*. Might this be what I mean by that disciplined praise, which kindles confidence? Moreover, it is not just praise for praise's sake. Less still, praise because of personal success. This is praise because, *only* because 'mein Jesus ist nah', 'my Jesus is near'. In this world, this week, that rightly points us to human achievement, the Christian faith alerts us to the insufficiency of that for wholeness and salvation. Wholeness and salvation are what Jesus offers. And that is why the Christian's primary obligation is to praise God who came near in the much beloved Son, and remains in the Holy Spirit, who is forever like an arm around our shoulders. In the range of what it is to be a parent, Mary models and Olive echoes the primacy of praise: 'My soul magnifies the Lord'; My heart ever faithful, sing praises, be joyful.'

Secondly, Mary models something else though. Movingly, so did Olive. It's that for every moment of determined praise there is also a place for quiet contemplation – for staring out of the train window as fields, factories, and front gardens rush by, for walking without listening to anything in order to be able to listen for whatever comes into that space. Place for that carefully unfilled silence that leaves opportunity for God to speak. I wonder if that is what Luke is getting at when he records that poignant moment when the new mother clasps her son and muses inaudibly upon what it all meant. There's something for us to consider here. How often we feel the need to crowd every second of a church service with words. Do we not want to leave space for God to get a word in? And so it is with our most intimate relationships, including parenthood. Sometimes it's remaining mute that is most eloquent. Yes, when enfolding the newborn in our arms, but also when watching our fully fledged struggling. We don't always have an answer, and there is no point in pretending that we do. Indeed, surely, we can do more harm by filling every silence with an amateur syllogism. Remember Elijah. It was in the sound of sheer silence that he was reconnected with God.³ Maybe, as with Mary and Elijah, silence can be that eloquent for us, too.

And thirdly, the Mary we see illustrated in Michelangelo's *Pieta* knows the place of weeping in her parenting. It's not weakness. It's not sentimentality. It's not flawed understanding. It's that sometimes, when our lives are intimately caught up in those of other people, things happen which we can't explain away, things we can't pretend are alright, things we can't buy a solution to, things that are just awful. And tears might flow. To stop them is to store up anguish for the future. To let them flow, is to give the emotion - for which no words are adequate - a meaningful expression. It is not always so; of course not. But tears are there for a reason, and sometimes it is to release pressure and ease pain. St John suggests that Jesus met bereavement with tears, and they are not to be stopped, less still to be apologised for. They take their place alongside praise and silence as part of relationships that are authentic and honest. And in the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, we are encouraged not to pretend be superhuman but to persist in being fully human. As we laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep, may we be comfortable with those who will do so with us, too.

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³ I Kings 19.12