

A sermon preached by The Revd Ainsley Haldane , Mothering Sunday, 22 March 2009

Spend a moment with me as we ponder the 13th station of the cross. The Pieta... Mary Mother of Jesus holding the dead body of her crucified son... the real flesh and blood woman...consider the depth of her sadness... listen to her as she speaks in this poem.

The ash-pale stars light what they can
the torches going down the hill
a row of crosses leaning toward the sea
and the moon bruised on the water
an empty boat floating beside it

When I asked him to bring me your body,
the one angel I knew waited, almost invisible
by the hill
for the last of the tired soldiers to get by

I'd like to believe you've only fallen asleep
or lost yourself in some deep prayer
but your body had grown so cold in the spring night
I can hardly hold you
you lie before me like a whole field
of sorrow our father harvests
your blood dried dark-red across my lap.



There have been many Pietas sculpted and painted. This one is by German sculptor Kathe Kollwitz. She knew the meaning of suffering. When her son was killed in the trenches in world war one, her art began to reflect on the theme of human suffering and hope. This bronze Pieta sits in a little public shrine to reconciliation in the former Eastern sector of Germany, not far from where the Berlin Wall once stood. It is in a place where prophecy was literally fulfilled... swords into ploughshares...a military training ground, now a national garden exhibition... children going to school where there were once military barracks...mushrooms now growing bountifully where in days gone by medium range missiles loomed large. I cannot help but hear the words of Mary's magnificent Magnificat ring true: he hath showed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and weak.

This picture points to the power of suffering love, in a world obsessed by the love of power.

But it also causes me to reflect on the strength of this uncommonly robust woman, Mary, mother of Jesus. In artistic form, she is oversized, able to cradle in her arms a full grown man. For the mother, the son will always be her little boy.

I see in this bronze, a sense of measured hope, that transcends the suffering and looks to the future. I see in this bronze the Gospel writer John's words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life." This comes to me in what I see as the possible connectedness of their eyes. It is as if Jesus is looking at Mary, at his mother, urging her to believe that God's will has just taken place and that she must now go on for

him after her grief. As he rests his lifeless hand in hers he is telling her that while his body is gone, his spirit will be with her, and all those who believe in him, until the end of the age. It is as if his true nature, his divine nature, is being revealed.

Bishop Jonathan Holland asks the question in his recent book, *Jesus Unbound*, what is this divine nature that is revealed through the triumph of the cross. He writes that there is not a point beyond which God in Christ will not go to show his love and commitment to the human race... the passion and the cross is the glory of Jesus, because they reveal his divine origin and the extent of God's love for his creation.

And do you know what... I think Mary knew this intuitively from the start of her journey. This Pieta is different from others I've seen, in that it speaks of the hope that will spring from the resurrection, now just a few hours away. It speaks of the interactions with Jesus' resurrected body that will follow in the next 40 days, his ascension and his sending of the Pentecost spirit, all of which we know that Mary was able to witness and experience. It speaks of a mother who was with her son every step of the way. It speaks of the essence of motherhood, as God would want it to be.

Mary was, after all, quite extraordinary. A woman of exalted and spotless pedigree, of Davidic lineage, she never thought of herself as better than others; instead she thought of herself as an Israelite, whose work was to be a good wife and mother, to live her life in the service of God. She was also a woman of faith and courage. Perhaps around thirteen at the time of her conception she had no family support for several years, yet she managed the storm with God's help. Following the Angel Gabriel's visit, it becomes clear that she was familiar with Jewish scripture and would understand the enormity of the task being asked of her. She would also have known, though only in part, the personal price she would have to pay to be the mother of the messiah...the doubt, suspicion and rejection she encountered because of her virgin conception and birth, but yet her amazing words "here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" continue to echo through the ages, an inspiration for millions of believers. Mary knew she had to go about the work of the Lord and not be distracted by the reaction of others. There is a lesson in this!

She was also a woman of meditation and reflection. She developed the habit of keeping her own council, treasuring things in her own heart, pondering on them and no doubt praying about them. Imagine how she would have felt when the shepherds burst in to see her newborn, telling some story about being frightened by a brilliant light and seeing the hillsides covered with God's army of angels. Having given birth in obscurity, she must have been the toast of the town. Still, treasuring her thoughts, I wonder if she actually understood Jesus' words following his gone missing episode in the temple, age 12...did they (his parents) not know that he must be in his father's house?

Yet I think she was a woman of deep understanding. Scripture implies that Joseph had died before Jesus began his ministry and that Mary assumed the role of matriarch. We can see this in her insistence, almost pushiness, when at the marriage of Cana in Galilee, she encourages Jesus to get his miracle life happening. And yet, parenting instincts don't just go away when a child reaches a certain age. She knew just when to let go... that her earthly relationship had to be subjugated to his divine mission. She realised along with the rest of the more reluctant family, that if they were to be saved, they all had to become his followers and disciples, for he indeed was the messiah, and there is no reason to think that she was not part of the team who travelled and provided for her son and his followers. ... and later she would take her place as an important member of the early church.

Nevertheless there is no hint that she ever tried to throw her weight around as the mother of Jesus. The humility she showed as a teenager, when she called herself the servant of the Lord was still present, in her mid forties as she stood at the cross looking up at her son and Lord. We don't know that she understood exactly, the reason for his death, but she nevertheless, quietly accepted his direction to go home afterwards with the apostle John.

The last mention of Mary is in Acts, following the ascension. The disciples had assembled in Jerusalem, she counted among them, her work as the mother of the son of God done. Her place was now in the church as a disciple. People today strive for greatness all around us. Mary showed that true greatness comes from placing your life in God's hands and doing whatever he calls you to do. Look at the Pieta again. Now see the foresight of this resolute woman who sang the words, "My soul doth magnify the Lord; and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour". She knew her son would somehow save her. What extraordinary intuition. How often do we see such intuitive understanding in the mothers we have known and loved? More than often, I suspect.