

LOVE FOR A MOTHER

John 19:25-27

As we all know today is Mother's day here in France and our reading speaks of Jesus loving and caring for his mother – which should encourage us to do the same for our mothers, with real selfless agape love. Our reading is quite a short passage, but let's remind ourselves of what Jesus said:

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing near by, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” (John 19:25-27 NIV)

We're also going to look at what other passages of scripture have to say about loving and caring for mothers and also other vulnerable people. Scripture teaches us that we must also care for widows and orphans and indeed all vulnerable people. In the book of James chapter 1 and verse 27 we read:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27 NIV)

But let's begin by considering our reading today.

We see that Jesus was not entirely forsaken in this, his most difficult hour. The attitude of the women standing near the cross is in a sharp contrast, especially in the original Greek text, with the greedy attitude of the squad of Roman soldiers carrying out this execution. The women wait in faithful devotion to Jesus whilst the Roman soldiers coolly profit from Jesus's clothing. These women are mothering Jesus, just by being there for him at the time of his greatest trial, especially Mary his actual mother.

How many women were present at the cross has been a source of some debate. It's possible to read our text today as there being either two, three or four women. I think the most natural reading is that

there were four women, two listed without John naming them and two whom John names. The synoptic gospels refer to a number of women at the cross, but speak of them as distant from the cross and don't introduce them until after Jesus's death. Look, for example, at Luke chapter 23, beginning at verse 46:

"Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things." (Luke 23:46-49 NIV)

Or Mark chapter 15 starting at verse 39:

"And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome." (Mark 15:39-40 NIV)

I always find it surprising that none of the twelve disciples, except John, were present at the crucifixion. Presumably they were scared of the Roman authorities.

I don't think we should see any contradiction between the account of John where the women are near and the synoptic accounts where they are said to be distant. I think it's overwhelmingly likely that onlookers would move nearer for a while and then retreat as the immediacy of Christ's suffering became impossible to endure. Certainly we cannot infer that close approach to the cross of Christ was forbidden, as the notice fixed to Jesus's cross on the orders of Pontius Pilate was clearly intended to be read. John tells us of this in chapter 19 and verse 19 of his gospel:

"Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." (John 19:19 NIV)

So who were these female onlookers? All four accounts mention Mary Magdalene (that is Mary of Magdala, a village on the shores of Galilee, just a few miles from Tiberias). John has not mentioned her before, but she figures prominently in the resurrection accounts and Luke refers to her in chapter 8 and verse 2 of his gospel as the woman from whom seven demons had been cast out by Jesus. We read: “After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out;” (Luke 8:1-2 NIV)

Only John mentions Mary the mother of Jesus. Of the other two women John mentions it’s possible that Mary the wife of Clopas is Mary the mother of James and Joses. If that’s correct then Salome (see Mark chapter 15 and verse 40) is the mother of James and John the sons of Zebedee – see chapter 27 of Matthew’s gospel: “Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons. ” (Matthew 27:56-57 NIV) and she is also a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We haven’t previously heard of the presence of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, but he’s mentioned in verse 26 of our reading. The words Jesus uses, *Here is your son* *Here is your mother*, sound rather like what would have been pronounced in a formal legal adoption, although we’re clearly not looking at a legal act here, but rather an act of compassion and mercy. As the eldest son, Jesus would probably have been the main breadwinner for the family before embarking on his public ministry since Mark’s gospel in chapter 6 and verse 3 makes it clear that Joseph, Jesus’s father, probably died at a fairly early age. We read: “Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offence at him.” (Mark 6:3 NIV) Here Jesus is referred to as “Mary’s son”, whereas in Jewish culture he would certainly have been referred to as Joseph’s son had his

father been alive. This also reminds us that Jesus was Joseph's adopted son, but not his biological son, as Mary conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our reading tells us that as Jesus hangs dying in agony on a Roman cross, he thinks of and makes provision for his mother. What a wonderful thought. What an encouragement to us to take care of our mothers. Of course, the obligation to love and care for our mothers isn't limited to their son's, women are not excluded from the loving and caring obligation. One example of the fulfilment of this obligation by a woman is found in the book of Ruth, where Naomi, Ruth's mother in law, receives practical support from Ruth in the shape of food gleaned by Ruth and later by virtue of Ruth's marriage to the wealthy Boaz, their kinsman redeemer.

It's perhaps surprising that none of Jesus's brothers or sisters were committed to take care of their mother, but there is no evidence that they were even in Jerusalem at this time. Certainly John, in chapter 7 and verse 5 of his gospel has already made it clear that Jesus's brothers were not sympathetic to Jesus and his ministry: "For even his own brothers did not believe in him." (John 7:5 NIV)

In any event we are told in verse 27 of our reading that from this time on, from the time of Jesus's death and exaltation, John took Mary, mother of Jesus, into his home and he, rather than her children, cared and provided for her .

Many Catholics read this passage where the disciple John takes Mary into his household; as Mary being mandated to take care of John – rather than the reverse. Clearly this opens the way to Mary being the mother of the church, especially if we see John as representative of all disciples. I don't accept that interpretation, I don't find that it fits well with a straightforward reading of the text, nor does it fit well with many surrounding facts or indeed other pronouncements of Jesus.

Firstly, chapter 3 of John's Gospel focuses on the exclusive importance of Christ, God's son, as regards our salvation, verses 17 and 18 read:

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.” (John 3:17-18 NIV)

Secondly, we see the finality and completeness of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, both of which are made clear in John gospel chapter 19 and verse 28. We read:

“Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty."” (John 19:28 NIV)

Thirdly, we see the promise of the Holy Spirit as the definitive aid to the believers after Jesus has been glorified, look at John chapter 15 and verse 26. We read:

““When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.” (John 15:26 NIV)

Fourthly, at the same time, Mary is de-emphasized by giving her almost no part to play in the narrative, and by reporting a rebuke, however gentle, that Jesus administered to her at the wedding in Cana as John reports in chapter 2 and verse 4 of his gospel.

Given these themes which are expressed clearly in the Bible texts, it is most natural to see in vv. 26–27 of our reading an expression of Jesus' love and care for his mother, a thoughtful provision for her needs at the hour of supreme devastation, rather than a commissioning of Mary to take care of John.

I believe that women, especially widows, should be seen as vulnerable persons and that we should provide for their care even when they are not our mothers. The passage from James chapter 1 and verse 27 that we've already read this morning speaks of this:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27 NIV)

indeed as Leviticus chapter 19 verses 9 and 10 tells us, this principle was embedded in Jewish Law. We read:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 19:9-10 NIV)

The fifth commandment also makes it clear that we are to honour and respect our mothers as well as our fathers:

“Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.” (Exodus 20:12 NIV)

I appreciate that some of us, probably many of us, will already have lost their mothers, but those who have can take the opportunity to care for other vulnerable people as scripture commands. Also, for some of you who've not grown up under the care of a loving mother, these statements I've been making about loving and caring for mothers may prove difficult to accept. I myself had a difficult childhood with a mother who suffered from various nervous disorders, especially agoraphobia. But, if we aim to be truly Christlike, we need to make the effort to honour and care for our mothers. There's no get out clause in the scriptures.

So this morning we've seen that Jesus placed great weight and importance on making good provision for and caring for our mothers. Jesus did that just before the culmination of the work that His Father had sent him to earth to accomplish, at a time when he was dying in agony on a Roman cross. Nothing can speak more clearly or forcefully than that of the importance we should be giving to this task. Let's all learn from Jesus and make sure we give a high priority to taking great care of our mothers with real selfless agape love whilst our mothers are still with us and if they've already passed on let's

direct our efforts to taking care of other vulnerable people as the scriptures command us to do.