

BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER

Mothing Sunday (Lent IV)

Sunday 15th March 2015

St. Michael's Cornhill

© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Only about three months into my curacy, Rob and Catherine came to see me about christening their baby girl Heather. She seemed to be a bonny and healthy baby. But, hardly had we begun to sort out a date for the baptism then Rob came round to see me again. Two days earlier, little Heather had developed odd symptoms and they had rushed her into the Radcliffe Infirmary. Following lots of tests, it was confirmed that Heather had been born with, or immediately developed, a particularly aggressive form of childhood leukemia. I christened baby Heather and over the next six months Rob and Catherine spent hours in the hospital with the tiny infant. I too spent time regularly with them there.

Every new form of treatment was used but just over six months from her birth Heather died in hospital. On a bitter February day, we stood out on the windswept hillside of Headington Cemetery as we committed Heather into the loving arms of God. Despite all the suffering, both parents were amazing – and especially Catherine. She was devastated, for the gift of life and the promise of motherhood, had been snatched cruelly away. Just a few months later, Catherine gave birth to a second child, again a little girl and I baptised Helen within the Sunday eucharist at St. Andrew's, Headington. Baby Helen is now, I imagine, a busy forty year-old and probably a mother herself.

All three of us learnt so much in those intense months. I learnt what Christian ministry is all about. The romantic and unrealistic strands were stripped away; it was the beginning of much more learning which goes on still year by year. Rob too learnt much as an alternately sad and joyful father; he was a generous and positive young man. But of all of us, it was Catherine who was, I suppose, most exposed in that crucible of suffering, dashed hopes and finally fulfilled motherhood. There was much weeping, some anger, but ultimately some remarkable thanksgiving – even for the sorrowful vale through which she had passed. I wish now that I had kept up with the family when I moved on.

Both our first reading and the gospel we've just heard capture some of these feelings classically, or at least I imagine they do. It's impossible for a man to enter completely into this realm, for motherhood is unique to itself. However, clearly Solomon in that first amazing narrative had some idea of the precious nature of motherhood. The notion of Solomon's *wisdom* is given a depth by this tale that few other stories could capture. Solomon is not only wise but courageous. The response of the first woman whose child was still alive could only be that of the true mother: Oh, my Lord, give her the living child, and by no means slay it.'

Similarly themes of gift, grace, motherhood and love emerge in the gospel reading. Let me remind you of the sentiment: When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son.'

It is no surprise, then, that a celebration of motherhood in itself (as we do annually on this Sunday) combines with that sense that the Church of God too is our mother, for the Church is itself an extension of the Incarnation. It lives and tells the life Jesus brings. But both these themes are captured too in the pivotal role that Mary plays in the story of our salvation. Now much ink has been spilled from Protestants and Catholics alike on the place of Mary within the Christian tradition.

Protestants have denounced *mariolatry*. Catholics have seen a downplaying of the incarnation itself by an ignoring or a disdaining of the part played by Mary. But Mary does not stand alone within scripture. She stands alongside a series of vignettes or tableaux of

motherhood. So, Pharaoh's daughter takes Moses, abandoned in the bulrushes as her son. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in the birth narrative of the great Israelite figure says: 'As long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.' Elizabeth's role in the birth of John the Baptist is celebrated. Finally, Mary too offers herself: 'Be it unto thee according to thy word.'

So, motherhood captures a strand which lies at the very centre of Christian truth. For motherhood is about gift and grace. It is not a reward for something done; also it is not in itself achieved by anyone alone. It is a gift. Catherine, in the story with which I began, saw that. She mourned the tragic death of Heather who had been born as a gift; she gave thanks for Helen who too was a gift.

So motherhood is an essential element within our tradition: Motherhood celebrates too the motherhood of grace. 'Ave Maria', that is hailing Mary, is effectively recognising that gift, *the grace of God* without which nothing else could exist, and which is made one with us in Mary's mothering Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Readings

I.Kings 3. 16-28

II.Cor. 1. 3-7.

John 19. 26-27.