

Sunday Homily

MOTHERING SUNDAY

27 MARCH 2022

YEAR C

“Woman, here is your son.”

John 19:26

Illustration

Holy Trinity Church has tried a different approach to Mothering Sunday, dropping the sentimental celebration of “Mom” that crept in with the American Mother’s Day invasion. Early in Lent, there was teaching about “kingdom kinship”. Then, instead of buying flowers for their mothers, everybody gave to a fund which was spent at www.oxfamunwrapped.com. Then a banner was hung up in church which read: TO OUR MOTHERS. Pinned to it were pictures of a first-aid kit, a donkey, and a toilet, things that the collection of £110 had bought for the poorest in our world. People were so moved (especially mothers) that they decided to start fundraising so they could support “Build a Classroom” on next Mothering Sunday.

Gospel Teaching

On this day especially, we’d like to interpret today’s Gospel as a dying son making provision for his mother. However, this is problematic for three reasons:

Firstly, because of Jesus’ treatment of his mother hitherto. These lines from the cross echo Jesus’ words at the wedding in Cana. On both occasions, Jesus addresses his mother as “woman”, adding at the wedding: “What have I to do with you?” This was not an isolated incident. From the moment he began living in God’s kingdom, Jesus ceased to be Mary’s son in the traditional sense. We learn from an episode in Mark 3:31ff. that, for Jesus, anyone who obeyed God was his mother. The incident in the Temple when he was twelve (Luke 2:41ff.) suggests that he had a spiritualised view of kinship from an early age.

Secondly, there were traditions in Judaism that ensured family members were looked after, especially widows. If Mary had been dependent on the personal care of Jesus, then his handing on of that care would make sense. But nowhere do we infer this to be the case. In the Gospels we see Mary in the company of her other children (or stepchildren), presumably in their care.

Thirdly, it’s significant which evangelist reports these words. John’s Gospel doesn’t tend to deal in mundane, domestic matters – especially when “the disciple whom Jesus loved” is involved. This disciple is referred to only when something

central to Jesus' mission is happening, from the Last Supper onwards. We should expect these words of Jesus to contribute to John's carefully constructed, deeply spiritual revelation of who Jesus is. Mothering Sunday or not, this is not the time to be distracted by sentiment.

There are two possible reasons why John includes these words of Jesus:

Firstly, to demonstrate Jesus' revolutionary view of kinship. Jesus is saying to his mother, "Look, as I've shown you throughout my life, I'm not exclusively your son. You love God and so does that disciple over there, so you two are mother and son, kith and kin, to each other." Typically, the Synoptic Gospels make this point in a dramatic incident (Mark 3:31ff.). In John's Gospel, equally typically, the same point is conveyed by a few words and, importantly, a meaningful act: John takes Mary into his home as a sign, an enacted parable, of this central tenet of Jesus' theology – kingdom kinship.

Secondly, John included these words because they link the Cana wedding and the crucifixion. We've already noted how Jesus addresses Mary as "woman" on each occasion. This is so striking that we make the link immediately. But there are other connections between the two events that John wants us to make.

At the wedding, God's glory flowed forth from Jesus' body in order to transfigure the wedding water into wine. He did this secretly because his hour had not yet come. He also did it reluctantly, and only because his mother pressured him into it – revealing how little she understood his mission.

Now, at his crucifixion, Jesus lets God's glory flow forth from his body for all the world to witness. God's glorification, a central Johannine theme, made much of by this evangelist in Jesus' farewell discourses at the Last Supper, is now a public demonstration.

And the reluctance has gone. Jesus glorifies God on the cross willingly, because now his hour has come. At the wedding of heaven and earth, his death and resurrection will transfigure the water of every person's dead religious life into the wine of a new spiritual life in God's kingdom.

Application

By doing something similar to Holy Trinity Church's scheme, we'd be as caring mothers to people in need. We'd also be celebrating that, as disciples whom Jesus loves, we're willing to take the world's poor into our hearts as if they were really our mothers.