

## **Mothering Sunday 2017 (Jn.19:31-37)**

What would you think, and what would you feel, if later in this service, at the end of the Eucharistic prayer, I said: 'as our Saviour taught us, so we pray' and then launched into the Lord's Prayer with the words 'Our Mother, who art in Heaven...'?

Our Mother. God the Mother. Mother God – or even Goddess. How would it be if the service was filled with that kind of language?

Christianity, as you will have noticed by now, is rather heavily invested in Father-language for God. It's Our *Father* who art in Heaven. We believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth. Dear Lord and Father of Mankind. Father of all, we give you thanks and praise.

Of course, most people understand perfectly clearly that God is not actually *male*. Whatever else maleness involves, they recognise it tends to involve certain bodily parts – and God has no bodily parts, so at the simplest level, 'he' – or she, or it - isn't male. Asking what sex God is makes no more sense than asking what smell music is, or how much the colour green weighs. And because it makes no sense to give God a sex, you are no more wrong to call God female than to call Him – or Her, or It – male. God is not male, and not female, and the *not* is equally strong in both cases.

But on the other hand, the Bible and the Church do use on the whole pretty exclusively masculine language for God. And that is not just a matter of their historical context. In the Ancient World, especially among Israel's neighbours, there were plenty of goddess religions, plenty of female divinities. It would not have been odd, not at all, to use feminine language for God. Israel and the Church made a choice *not to*, and it is worth asking why.

Now this, it will not surprise you, is the sort of thing people have written very large books about, and where careless talk can get people into lots of trouble. I do not have time, and you do not have the patience, for me to be very careful and precise this morning – so here is the simple headline version.

Israel and the Church chose *Father* language, rather than Mother language, to talk about God because they thought it communicated more clearly the awesome sense of distance and difference between the creature and creator. It emphasised the notion of God's authority, God's power: remember, we believe in God the Father *Almighty*. Fathers were, well, patriarchal: figures of authority, governance, kingship.

*Mothers* on the other hand are more intimate. The child grows inside the mother. The baby is, literally, flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone: mother and child are bound together in the most intimate physical union possible. The Father was there at the beginning, sure: but the Mother carries the child within, forms him or her, bears them into life. And even after birth, no matter how modern our arrangements, it is *usually* the mother who remains the primary care giver. *Usually* the mother who we associate with intimate care, with cuddles, who is even more instinctively attuned to the child and their needs than the father. Mother and child go together; with father and child there is always, even when that relationship is a very good one, that little bit more distance and difference.

And that *difference*, on the whole was the *first* thing Israel and the Church wanted to say about God. He was radically *different*, completely *other*, than everything which He made: He is above, beyond, and rules over everything that exists. That's *Father* territory, which is why Father language is mostly what you get in the Bible.

However, it wasn't *all* they wanted to say about God. Because this radically different Father God had after all created the world out of love, chosen to be in relationship with it and in Jesus to actually join his life with it. However much you stress the difference between God and the world, you also have to stress the intimacy – and so every so often in the Bible you also find Mother language bursting to the surface. We heard Isaiah (42:14) this morning comparing God to a woman in labour, Hosea 11 describes her as a nursing mother. In Luke 13:34 Jesus compares himself to the mother hen protecting her chicks; and John's Gospel is full of talk of our needing to be *born* of God. And what people are born of, of course, is normally a mother.

Perhaps the most potent image of all this comes near the end of that Gospel (19:34), the part we heard this morning, when John describes the soldiers piercing Christ's side – 'and blood and water flowed'. Blood and water: this is birth. We sometimes think of the Cross as a place where Jesus bore the punishment of the world, or where he somehow paid some sort of debt or made some sort of sacrifice. And all those can be useful ways of thinking, but John here is just hinting at another one. What if Christ's pain on the cross is a kind of labour pain? What if his body is being broken open not, as it were, from the outside by Roman nails and spear but from the inside, by the great tides of love and life which he has borne within him, which now rush out into the world? He's giving birth: to a new family made in the life and love. That's an idea later Christians enthusiastically picked up, sometimes making pictures of the crucifixion with a little church building coming out of Jesus' side.

And if the Cross is a place of birth, well then that makes Jesus in at least some sense a *mother*. And that's an idea you find not just in the modern, radical feminist theologies, but way back in the eleventh and twelfth century church: Jesus our Mother. It was never a very prominent theme, it was always a little unusual – but it was always *there*, and perfectly respectable within Christian theology. Julian of Norwich, one of England's greatest saints, is well worth having a look at. Having said just what I've just said about the Cross – I have no original ideas, you see – she also said, for instance, that the Eucharist was where Mother Jesus breast-fed her children. Think of it: the Eucharist as breast feeding. Jesus feeds you with Himself, pours Himself into you, empties Himself so that you might live. All you can do is receive. All that is needed is love: and not even yet *your* love. One day you will love, but for the moment there is simply the love of the mother who bore you. That comes first, and on it everything about you is utterly dependent.

So maybe the Church needs Mothering Sunday not just to celebrate mothers, though that is of course a very good thing. It needs Mothering Sunday as a way to remember what could get a little eclipsed by all the Father language, all the King language, all the Power and Glory language. All that language is of course true, but if it's all you ever hear then you might forget that actually at the heart of the way God deals with the world is something much more like mothering. At the very heart of it, there's a painful, sacrificial, joyful birth, where God decides to empty God-self out so that others can live, and to go on pouring God's life into them. That's a way of talking about the creation of the world, about the first Good Friday, and about every Eucharist. You touch the same thing at the heart of each of them: the great mothering of God.

Which means that though we're not going to change the liturgy anytime soon, and though there are very good reasons for not doing so, it remains true: you could actually do worse, just once in a while, than to pray 'Our Mother, who art in Heaven'. To God, the Father *and* the Mother, beyond all gender, be the glory forever and ever. Amen.