

Mary, Mother of joys and sorrows: Model of pastoral care

The Revd Dr Jonathan Pye

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For months, the hospital looked like a building site – in fact, it was building site. A multi-million pound expansion plan virtually doubled the size of the old city Maternity Hospital to incorporate a whole range of women's services. At the very heart of the building site, where the old met the new, was the architects' room, a large room with a second small room leading off it, a room now filled with trestle tables, rolls of plans, hard hats and yellow jackets and, most of all, dust... And that's when the idea struck. This would make an ideal Chapel for the new combined hospital, bridging as it did the old hospital and the new extension; on the ground floor, easily accessible by patients, visitors and staff alike, the spiritual pulse at the heart of a busy modern city hospital. And, because I can be a very persuasive person, so it was. When the contractors moved out, the rooms were re-furnished to create a sacred space, a place of tranquillity and calm amidst all the hustle and bustle of hospital life. It was at that point that I was approached by an anonymous benefactor who gave me a sum of money to purchase something for the Chapel. What should I buy? The NHS Trust had already furnished the Chapel, a new altar, lectern, chairs, the votive lamp and appropriate books and bookcases were all already in place. I talked it over with my Chaplaincy colleagues and we soon agreed to approach an Orthodox nun, living in Bath, who devoted her time and life to creating icons, following the traditions of iconography laid down by centuries of devotion. And what better for the Chapel of a hospital dedicated entirely to the needs and care of women than an icon of Mary. And so it was.

As you well know, icons of Mary, the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, other than those which depict scenes from the New Testament or from her life, such as the incarnation or the dormition of Mary, follow two traditional models – the *hodergeterion* icon, literally the 'pointer of the way' with an impassive, even at times stern, Mary, head erect holding an equally erect Christ child in her arm, his hand often raised in solemn blessing, with her other hand pointing to him – hence the title, *hodergeterion*. The other model, the *elousan*, or compassionate, icon of Mary is altogether different. In such icons, Mary cradles the Christ child, her head inclines to his as he reaches round to embrace her. This is the image of the tender mother, intimately connected with the child she bore. And yet, the sadness present in her eyes shows not only the tenderness of love but also the pain of the mother who already knows the destiny which awaits this child, God's gift to creation.

This, then, was the image, the icon, we chose – an image of Mary in whom both joy and sorrow co-mingle, in whose eyes we see both the joy of the mother, yet one whose joy is already tinged by the sorrow with which the *mater dolorosa* will stand at the foot of the Cross. This image stands, then, for the breadth and depth of care that is shown in the pastoral context where joy and grief form the warp and weft of life and the model of divine love which patterns the Church's care for her children.

This theme of the mother of joys, the mother of sorrows, spanning, and holding in tension, the range of human emotion is, then, the theme of this sermon. And nowhere do we see this tension more clearly than in the gospel reading for today with Luke's account of the meeting of the holy family with the elderly Simeon and Anna in the Temple precincts.

Let's, then, for a moment, set the scene. Half way through the second chapter of Luke's gospel, the story shifts from the birth narratives to the infancy narratives, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. The shift here is almost brutal - verse 20, the shepherds depart, singing with joy for what they have seen, angel led to the stable and the manger; verse 21, and Jesus is being taken by Mary and Joseph to the Temple in order to fulfil the requirements of the Jewish Law for their first-born, male child and we hear the story that today we call the story of the Presentation of Christ.

In fact, Jewish Law provided three ceremonies following the birth of a male child (although in condensing the story, Luke elides, or confuses, two of them). The first was circumcision, which took place on the eighth day after birth and was usually, as Luke recounts about Jesus in his gospel, the time of giving the child his name (though Luke rightly makes the point that *this* child's name was angel-given before his conception). Then, in the case of a firstborn child, there was the rite of redemption which involved the paying of a monetary offering of five shekels, which could be done any time after the first month. Here the child is offered to God, then 'redeemed' or 'bought back' by his parents by the payment made. Here you can see the parallels with Hannah, especially in the bringing of the child Jesus to the Temple (something which the Law of Moses did not require). Hannah takes her infant son, Samuel to the Temple, and leaves him there in fulfilment of her promise that she will offer him to God – to her we will return a little later. But note that no ransom price is paid here either, like Samuel, the child, Jesus, is not 'bought back' but is rather offered/consecrated to God. Finally, there was the rite for the purification of the mother which took place forty days after the birth. This rite marked the mother's inclusion back into the worshipping community. It was *this* rite that involved the sacrifice of a lamb and a turtle dove (or a young pigeon) although the poor were permitted the substitution of a second dove or pigeon if they couldn't afford the lamb, and it's interesting to note that this is the offering recounted by Luke – here, he is saying, is an ordinary, working-class family, coming dutifully to fulfil what their faith required of them in the Mosaic law.

This is where we pick up the story in our gospel reading today. As Mary and Joseph come to the Temple, they encounter there, within its precincts, the two pious and devoted elderly people, Simeon and Anna. Simeon, we are told, was looking for 'the consolation of Israel' (a common Rabbinic description of the Messianic Age) and Anna for 'the redemption of Jerusalem'.

Now with the Messiah before him, his joy knows no bounds and Simeon takes the child into his arms and his song of joy, echoing the words of Isaiah, comes to us in the now familiar words of the *Nunc Dimittis* as he sees in this child what has been called '*a phoenix symbol of new life burning up from the dying fire of old Israel.*'¹ But this is a song of joy with a dark edge to it, for at this point Simeon also addresses Mary with words not only about her son but about her also, for the child she brings to the Temple to offer to God is '*set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against...*' and then, in parenthesis, he adds the words, '*and a sword will pierce through your own soul also*'.

We, who know how the story unfolds, not least through our readings in Lent and Holy Week, know how this prophecy is played out on the stage of human history in the life, the Passion, the Death and, ultimately, the Resurrection of Jesus, and of the decisions which human beings must make in their responses to God, responses which will shape their lives for good or ill, but here Mary is given the first glimpse of the road of suffering her beloved son will walk and the shadow of the cross and his Passion passes across her, like the cloud passing across the sun, whose chill brings a momentary shiver.

Mary, then, holds in tension the joy and grief of the world and of her own experience. The mother who comes, like Hannah, to offer her child of promise to God in the Temple now bears joy and pain in equal measure. It is not just the inevitable pain of a parents 'letting go' (a theme which we will explore in more detail tomorrow...) but the joy and the pain that are the inescapable corollaries of the intimate bonds of love which bind us to another person in the commitment to faithful companionship, for the Mary who now lets her son go into the hands of the elderly Simeon for him to be blessed, will receive him back again at the deposition, when his body is taken down from the cross and the mother cradles her son in death as an adult, as she cradled him once in life as a child. This is the moving image of the *Pietà* – and no-one who has seen Michelangelo's stunning representation of the sorrowful mother, holding her dead son in her arms, can fail to be moved by the intimacy with which the sculptor captures in the marble the emotion of a mother's tender grief, in which joy and suffering co-mingle in the intimacy of love, even in the distance of death.

For the pastoral practitioner, ordained or lay, every pastoral encounter is likewise a moment in which is experienced this tension of both intimacy (the typology of the *elousan*) and distance (the typology of the *hodergeterion*). There is distance in that, like Mary, she cannot hold onto her son as if he were simply hers to possess; she cannot 'save' him from his destiny, nor walk the way of suffering on his behalf; to do so would be to take away from him the individuality of otherness, without which there is no respect; but there is intimacy also in that her love is deep and constant, it is the bond of her connectedness to the other - she does not, *cannot*, abandon her son or leave him to walk alone the way of his suffering. Such faithfulness and the intimacy of her love, then, becomes the sword of her suffering which, in Simeon's words, 'pierces through' her soul. This is the inevitable and

¹ J. Neville Ward, *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*.

inescapable consequence of love and that which lies between such distance and intimacy is always sacred space.

Another way of putting this is to talk of the pastoral relationship in terms of 'vocation' or 'call' (or, indeed, of 'covenant'). Mary is called by God and her calling is life-long. She cannot opt in and out as she chooses, selecting only the good times, avoiding the bad; for Mary, as Mother of our Lord, her parenting, as for all parents, is for life. And this is no sentimentalised view of parenting for the joy of her vocation is mirrored by the grief she bears as the mother of sorrows. For Mary, the grief *she* suffers is perhaps the greatest of all griefs, the grief of a parent who outlives their child, for the mother who gazes down into the manger in which her son lies at the beginning of the gospel is the same mother who will gaze up onto the cross, tenanted by her son towards its end. As such, in her faithful obedience and in her love, her pastoral vocation becomes the pattern for our own.

Later pastoral practice will describe this love as agapeistic – love which is without self-interest, unconditional and un-reserved; a constant love which is other-orientated and which always seeks their well-being (what ethicists sometimes call their 'best interests'). But it is also 'tough' love, it knows where the boundaries of love lie for without this it would lack the ability to 'let go' as well as embrace.

But, perhaps above all, this love is empathetic love – the '*path...*' bit in the middle of the word has the same root as in *sympathetic* or *compassionate* and its meaning lies in the ability to enter with someone into their sufferings. It is the ability to maintain and to sustain relationships in the dark times and places of human experience, and because of this, it is love which has within it the quality of constancy.

And this is the love which we see in Our Lord's mother, a love which is enduring, constant, passionate, a love which is capable of bearing both the joy of relationship and the pain of being with others in their suffering without running away from the pain, because that is what we are called to do. At one point in the gospels, a parallel is drawn between Jesus and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy – '*in all our afflictions he was afflicted...*' something that the playwright Albert Camus notices in Jesus and which he describes as '*that sadness which can be felt in his every act...*'² In Mary we see the mother suffering, with her son, alongside her son, in her son and in her vocation, we glimpse our own.

Such constancy is the mark of true pastoral care, for it is the love which holds the other, whether literally or metaphorically, in the dark night of our being; which says to the other, 'you are not alone...' Mary, *theotokos*—'God bearer'—who bears the body of Christ in her womb to birth, and bears her son's body in her arms in death, watches with him in his Passion, ensuring that he is not alone. Who knows whether Simeon's words, long held, come to her mind, but in the constancy of her love her soul is sword-pierced indeed, for love such as this transforms and transfigures both lover and loved.

² Albert Camus, *The Fall*.

Thus for both Hannah and Mary, the child of promise is given back to God and the song of their joy is fulfilled in the sorrow of their faithfulness. And so the icon of Mary graces the hospital Chapel where it still hangs, and the mother of Our Lord is with those women who come there in joy or in grief, as only a woman can be. And because life, like the gospel, is sometimes messy and sometimes painful as well as joyful, her sadness as well as her joy touches those who come – unconditional, empathetic, constant, the model of pastoral care which, through love, transforms and which gives us, in the words of the theologian, Harry Williams, a glimpse of heaven's glory in the grit of earth.

I want to end by reading to you Caryll Houselander's poem, *The Circle of a Girl's Arms*. Houselander was both a poet and a painter, and she worked tirelessly for the Catholic Church among the poor of East London in the mid years of the twentieth century and through the horrors of the Second World War. It is a poem that, for me, both as a teacher and as a practitioner, sums up what pastoral care is all about:

The circle of a girl's arms
have changed the world
the round and sorrowful world
to a cradle of God.

She has laid love in his cradle.
In every cot,
Mary has laid her child.

In each
comes Christ.
In each Christ comes
to birth,
comes Christ from the Mother's breast,
as the bird from the sun
returning,
returning again to the tree he knows
and the nest,
to last year's rifled nest.

Into our hands
Mary has given her child,
heir to the world's tears,
heir to the world's toil,
heir to the world's wars,
heir to the chill dawn
over the ruin of wars.

She has laid love in his cradle,
answering for us all.
'Be it done unto me.'

The child in the wooden bed,
the light in the dark house,
the life in the fainting soul,
the Host in the priest's hands,
the seed in the hard earth,
the man who is child again,
quiet in his burial bands

waiting his birth.

Mary, Mother of God,
we are the poor soil
and the dry dust,
we are hard with a cold frost.

Be warmth to the world,
be the thaw,
warm on the cold frost,
be the thaw that melts.
That the tender shoot of Christ,
piercing the hard heart,
flower to a spring in us.

Be the hands that are rocking the world
to a kind rhythm of love;
that the incoherence of war
and the chaos of our unrest
be soothed to a lullaby, and the round and sorrowful world
in your hands,
the cradle of God.³

Here, in the mother of joy and the mother of sorrows, pastoral practitioners learn their intimate craft and practise their vocation; here they experience the true joy of the love they show, and here they can take the pierced heart which is, so often, the price of our loving.

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³ Caryll Houslander, *The Flowering Tree*.