

Just Like a Mother

Today I'm departing from my usual method of preaching, and moving away from the Lectionary readings—although I hasten to say that this will still be a very biblical sermon.

Today is, according to the Lectionary calendar, the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter in Year B—and thus another opportunity to be reminded of the purposes of Christ and the nature of God revealed in Jesus as the ultimate definition of Love. But, unmentioned and unacknowledged by the Lectionary, it is a day far better known to us as Mother's Day. This is a secular holiday, of course, and in the strictest sense it should not take precedence over the religious calendar—but, undoubtedly, Mother's Day has taken on religious significance for us too (not least because it always occurs on a Sunday). Its value to us culturally and emotionally also makes it of great enough importance to celebrate with the community of faith—which itself is often referred to as a 'family.' So this is unashamedly a Mother's Day sermon.

[And firstly I must tell you that Mother's Day remains a painful day for me, for it is one of the great griefs of my life that I do not have children. Usually, whenever I mention this, all the mothers in the room start thinking that I could have at least one of their children if I really need to experience that particular aggravation!]

For me all the joy *and* the pain of Mother's Day are wrapped up in the gift of how we envision God—and ourselves. What a pain it is when after nearly a century of feminist scholarship we still think that God's only proper name is "Father" and that "man" and "men" are the generic words for humanity. I have completely lost any patience I ever had about these matters of inclusive language and so forth—and the choir can testify to the fact that on this issue I have a 'short fuse.' How can we still be having this argument, I ask? Are women part of humanity or not? And if women are fully human, then shouldn't the church be leading the world to the perfection of that reality rather than being one of the last bastions of male dominance?

Ah, but oh what a joy it is when (at least on Mother's Day) we can affirm that the God we so easily call 'Father' is also *just like a mother*—and that we all have feminine motherly attributes (whether we like to admit it or not)!

Perhaps I should be clear that God is like a good and caring mother—for, as with all of the father images of God—we need to be cautious about that fact that some people have experienced abusive parents and therefore find all parental metaphors of God confusing at best and frightening at their worst. Maybe the point is, in fact, that no image and no metaphor is adequate by itself to describe and define God. That is

precisely why the hymn after this sermon is Brian Wren's wise counsel: "Bring many names."

However it is fair to say that we all most familiar with how God is like a good father. This was Jesus' favourite way of describing his own relationship with God—extending it to say that we also are all children of the Father, and thus able to pray "Our Father..." Actually, Jesus' prayer if translated literally is more like "Our Daddy," for Jesus uses the most intimate word in his language to describe this divine-human/parent-child relationship. Given that fact, would it really be all so terrible to pray to "Our heavenly Mum"? And yet, even as I say that, I can feel the discomfort rising in the room (and even in myself). It is a discomfort grounded in the appallingly selective translations and theological scholarship of our ancestors—and we all need to be liberated from it.

The strange thing is that it shouldn't be any secret at all to anyone who values biblical scripture that there have always been many feminine and motherly images of God. Is it not a foundation of our faith to believe that human beings are made in the image of God—both male and female? [Genesis 1:27] Doesn't that one verse of Genesis tell us something profoundly important about the gender-inclusive nature of God?

And then, like the television commercials, I'll say...And there's more!!

There are the references to giving birth:

- For instance, in Isaiah 42:14 God's anguish at the human failure to embody justice is captured in an image of a woman in pain, unable to catch her breath in her labour. "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself. But now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant." Then, out of God's travail comes a new world in which even the blind are safe as darkness turns to light.
- In Acts 17 Paul's sermon tells us that God is the one who gives life and breath to everyone and everything: "God in whom we live and move and have our being." [Acts 17: 26-28] *God in whom we live and move and have our being:* Where else but in our mothers' wombs did we experience that?
- Jesus too speaks of his own suffering as initiating the birth-pangs of bringing forth the new humanity. In John 16 this is specific as he uses a birth image to comfort the disciples concerning the difficulties they would face—the pain of contractions and then the joy when a baby is born. But even an image like the Vine and Branches is also motherly—in Jesus time it was common for the old vines to be called "mother vines."
- The Holy Spirit is also described as a mother, such as in John 3:6: "What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit." And, in fact, all "new birth" or "born again" imagery is an affirmation of divine motherliness. To proclaim that people "must be born again of Spirit" is to proclaim a connection to God that is not merely child-like but womb-like—turning away from self-centrality and becoming as perfectly connected to God as the unborn

infant is connected to the woman whose life supports its life, and to depend on God in that same measure.

Beyond birth images, there are others:

- Isaiah 49:15 uses the word for a nursing mother: “So the Lord answers, ‘Can a woman forget her own baby and not love the child she bore? Even if a nursing mother should forget her child, I will never forget you.’” God’s love is like mother love—the most constant, most reliable and most consistent of all forms of human caring. But then, because even such love is not always perfect in humans, divine love is all this and more; it is never-failing.
- And Psalm 131:2 says of prayerful communion with God: “I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother’s breast.”
- Isaiah also writes of God who, like a mother “cared for you from the time you were born...and will take care of you until you are old and your hair is white.” [Isaiah 46: 3-4] Or like a mother eagle teaching her young to fly by bearing them up on her wings. Or, at the end of time, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.” [Isaiah 66: 13]
- And relating to the special grief of mothers whose children follow harmful ways, Jesus says: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” [Luke 13:34]

I could go on but must restrain myself. And, just in case the men are feeling left out about now, you’ll have a real treat in store come Father’s Day. Besides it is important to say that fathers are, of course, capable of all the same feelings and activities as mothers (except those that are strictly biological). But in the context of biblical writings there is a distinct difference in the roles of fathers and mothers and it is essential that we acknowledge and affirm both because our understanding of both God and humanity is dreadfully impoverished if we do not.

So *this* day I invite you all to worship the God who is you mother. Perhaps for a moment you could think of your own mothers or grandmothers or other women in your lives who have been particularly important, caring and reliable—women upon whom the physical or spiritual reality of your life has depended. Then perhaps you could also imagine yourselves being like good mothers to those you love—and to the world. Imagine if these dynamics of human mothering were what we knew of the God whose name is Love.

For God is all that and more.

God is kind and gentle, strong and principled.

God loves us. God teaches us. God disciplines us.

God cares about us no matter what we do.

God nurtures us. God leads us. God laughs at us—and coaxes us to laugh.

God takes risks for our sake—and asks us take risks for others.

God wants us to grow—to become all that we can be, all that we are meant to be.  
God takes pleasure in our joys and shares our pain when we despair.

And even when we die, it is God's voice that lulls us to sleep...*just like a mother.*  
*Just like a mother.*