

**Mother's Day Sermon for Lancefield
The Sixth Sunday of Easter, 9th of May 2010**

Isaiah 49:13-18
Luke 13:31-35

Today is Mothers' Day, a good day to celebrate the Mother we all share, whose beloved children we are. The Bible contains many images of and metaphors for God, and one of the ways used to describe the extent of God's love is by comparing it to a mother's love for a child. As Isaiah asks on God's behalf: "Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."¹

It's this idea of a mother as someone who cannot fail to love her child, whose love is generous and tender and self-sacrificial, that is behind the comparison that Jesus makes in the gospel reading. Jesus is making his way towards Jerusalem, teaching as he travels. He has just been warned that Herod wishes to kill him, but he refuses to change his mission out of fear. Jesus will continue casting out demons and healing people; and he will continue travelling towards Jerusalem, even though it will lead to his death.

Jerusalem murders prophets and stones those sent to it. It will be where Jesus himself dies. And yet his love for the city is still altruistic and gentle; still the love of the hen who protects her brood with her very body. This is the Jesus of Luke who, on the Cross, will pray "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing".

This image of Jesus as Mother, with the other maternal images of God in the Bible, was a very popular one in the Middle Ages. Julian of Norwich, who was an anchoress, a sort of solitary enclosed nun, wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love* in about 1393, in which she has a very detailed theology of motherhood. Julian writes:

The mother's service is the closest, the most helpful and the most sure, for it is the most faithful. No one ever might, nor could, nor has performed this service fully but [Jesus] alone. ...This fair, lovely word "mother", it is so sweet and so tender in itself that it cannot truly be said of any but of him...To the nature of motherhood belong tender love, wisdom and knowledge, and it is good...The kind, loving mother who knows and recognises the need of her child, she watches over it most tenderly, as the nature and condition of motherhood demands.

This is an incredible challenge to all mothers – they are called to be like Jesus.

Earlier, in the twelfth century, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, had written:

But you Jesus, good lord, are you not also a mother? Are you not that mother who, like a hen, collects her chickens under her wings? Truly, master, you are a mother. For what others have conceived and given birth to, they have received from you...You are the author, others are the ministers. It is then you, above all, Lord God, who are mother...Christ, mother, who gathers under your wings you little ones, your dead chick seeks refuge under your wings. For by your gentleness, those who are hurt are comforted; by your perfume, the despairing are reformed. Your warmth resuscitates the dead; your touch justifies sinners.

Mothers, in these images, are warm, tender, gentle, willing to experience great suffering to bring their child to birth. And this is one of the ways that these medieval Christians saw Jesus.

One historical aspect of Christ's motherhood than may seem bizarre and even off-putting to us is the image of Jesus as the breast-feeding mother. For many medieval writers, breast-feeding was an obvious analogy for the Eucharist, in which Christ feeds us with his own body and blood. And so there are examples of writers discussing theological breast-feeding.

¹ Isaiah 49:15.

Ailred of Rievaulx in Yorkshire wrote a book of practical advice for his sister sometime in the 1160s, advising her on how to live as a Christian recluse. Among his advice is a description of what her chapel should look like, which includes this:

On your altar let it be enough for you to have a representation of our Saviour hanging on the Cross; that will bring before your mind his Passion for you to imitate, his outspread arms will invite you to embrace him, his naked breasts will feed you with the milk of sweetness to console you.

And in her *Revelations*, Julian of Norwich wrote:

... The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most generously and most tenderly with the holy sacrament, which is the precious food of life itself.

As I said, for our twenty-first century sensibilities, these images might seem strange. But if any of you have ever watched a mother breast-feed a baby, or breast-fed a baby yourself, you'll know the love and intimacy that that action involves. Of course, sometimes, my sister and friends tell me, breast-feeding is just an enormous nuisance, especially if the baby gets distracted by other things or falls asleep while feeding, and the whole thing takes hours. But generally, it is a time of amazing nurture and closeness, and it is that generous and tender love, to paraphrase Julian, of which these images of Jesus as mother remind us.

There are as many potential difficulties in referring to God as Mother as there are in referring to God as Father. Not all women are mothers; not all mothers are nurturing; not all women find motherhood a joyous experience; not all children have reasons to honour their mothers. It has been pointed out that images of God as Father are problematic for people who were abused by their fathers; sadly, referring to God as Mother can create the same difficulty.

There are also difficulties in dividing attributes into masculine and feminine: saying that to nurture is purely feminine, for example, and that to teach is distinctively masculine. That is the sort of thing Anselm of Canterbury said in his prayer to Jesus and Saint Paul:

You are fathers by your effect and mothers by your affection.
 Fathers by your authority, mothers by your kindness.
 Fathers by your teaching, mothers by your mercy.
 Then you, Lord, are a mother, and you, Paul, are a mother too.

I don't want to suggest that only men can be strong, and only women can be tender. After all, this discussion began with the maternal imagery used by the male Jesus.

But despite these potential problems, using maternal images for God can enrich our understanding of God. Using a variety of different images helps us get closer to the God who is beyond every image and metaphor that we can come up with, the God who is beyond time and place and age and gender and nationality and all the attributes that we humans think are so important. We cannot comprehend God, God is beyond us. All we can do is approach the transcendent One in any way that we can. One of these ways is by comparing the God who is so much higher than our understanding to a breast-feeding mother and to a hen, gathering her chicks under her wings.

Today is Mothers' Day. It's a good day to celebrate *all* mothers – including God, who is our Mother as well as our Father, and Jesus who loves us like a mother. Without wanting to put any pressure on the mothers present amongst us, the medieval Christians who described Jesus as their mother reminds us that motherhood is a ministry, a very demanding and important one. So today we give thanks to God for all mothers. Amen.