

mother of us all
a sermon preached on the
feast of mary, mother of our Lord
12 August 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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The lections: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Song of Mary; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2: 1-7

For the Anglican Church, Mary the Mother of our Lord has been until recently a 'neglected relative'. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, once said that she was like an embarrassing old aunt, kept away in a corner!

This has not always been the case for Anglicans though. The 16th century Anglican reformers who created our prayer book honoured her status as the Mother of our Lord. While some Protestant traditions spurned paying any attention at all to Mary, mainly because she is so exalted in Roman Catholicism, the English reformers did not. While they rejected what they saw as *worship* of Mary, they still retained her ancient title of 'Mother of God'. By the time the Book of Common Prayer was settled in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, it listed a number of feast days related to Mary, including the one we celebrate today.

Despite the Reformers' insistence on respect for Mary, however, increasing paranoia about the Roman Catholic Church meant that over the centuries she was virtually forgotten in Anglican worship and spirituality. In recent decades, mainly thanks to feminist scholarship but also because of increasing Anglican dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, she has been restored.

It's worth reflecting on why Mary had become so important in the Church before the Reformation. In the late Middle Ages, the Church intensified its anti-women stance, in particular through its introduction of the iron-clad rule against clergy marriage. Clergy were not allowed to marry because the Church claimed that close contact with women would contaminate priests, and in particular, their sacramental role. Marriage, they said, was contaminating. The laity, who were allowed to marry, were regarded as very much second-class Christians.

Isolating the clergy from close relationships with women caused a reaction, however. They needed the feminine in their lives. So the deep psychological longing for the feminine and the maternal was met by the creation of Mary not as a real woman (that would have been far too threatening!) but as an unreal, plaster figure, a perpetual virgin, and queen of heaven. This cult of the Virgin Mary created a pure, untouchable woman that could be adored safely. And at a time when Jesus' role as the stern judge of humankind was strongly emphasised, his mother came to be seen as an approachable mediator between humans and God.

This was a maternal role she was assigned: Mary as mother – mother not only of our Lord, but mother of all – a motherly godlike figure for a church becoming more rigidly hierarchical, and whose official doctrines insisted on a harsh masculine God and therefore the godliness of the masculine.

Mary as a far more biblical mother-figure has emerged in Anglican culture in recent years with our increasing interest in icons. Like all authentic portrayals of Mary, icons overwhelmingly depict her mothering the baby Jesus, and they are very endearing. These images can draw us closely into prayer. Prayer not *to* Mary, but *with* Mary, who always points us to her Son.

That is where today's Gospel draws us. On this feast day, it is not the Annunciation to Mary that we hear – that momentous day when the young girl from Nazareth courageously accepted God's unimaginable call to be the means by which God entered the human condition. Not that we are ignoring her critical role in the conception of Jesus – her DNA, and her feminine bodiliness, her womb, were vitally important to the Incarnation. And that is why Mary is unique among the saints of God. She is not just a faithful servant of God, but the Mother of God.

Rowan Williams has explained how Mary's consent to bear the Christ-child invites us to view her. He has written: "By her consent she makes Jesus possible in that place, at that time. And we

should not be ashamed of looking to her to hold our hands from time to time as we take the first steps that may make Jesus possible in this place, in this time. It's quite hard to imagine the depth and the level and the cost of what is asked of her by God in Luke's story of the Annunciation; to look at her and meditate on her 'yes' and seek her friendship in prayer is not at all an eccentric or foolish thing for a Christian to do if we want to grow in trust."¹

Today, the Gospel focus is on her as the birth mother, the woman giving birth far from home, away from the local midwives and women friends who should have been on hand to help her, in a stable, with nowhere to lay her baby but an animal feeding trough. This is the image of Mary we are invited to ponder today – Mary the mother, caring for her newborn child.

This feast is an invitation to us to let go of any suspicious, steely, rationalist theologies that might have taught us to reject Mary. Instead, it invites us to let ourselves enter our own longing for the deeply maternal love of God. Now this isn't a modern feminist concept. The 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich described Jesus in maternal terms, and even earlier, so did another Archbishop of Canterbury, the 11th century Anselm, a Benedictine monk. His 'Song of Christ's Goodness' is printed in our Australian prayer book as an alternative canticle. You will find it on page 428.

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you:
You are gentle with us as a mother with her children;
Often you weep over our sins and our pride:
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds:
in sickness you nurse us,
and with pure milk you feed us.
Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life:
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness:
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.
Your warmth gives life to the dead:
your touch makes sinners righteous.
Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us:
in your love and tenderness remake us.
In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness:
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

Letting ourselves be enfolded in the motherly love of God might not be easy. Our own experiences of being mothered might have been deficient. Or if like me you lost your mother in childhood, then drawing close to Mary as the image of the maternal love of God can reignite your grief. Or if you longed for children and do not have them, or there has been great pain in your parenting experience, today's feast might be difficult.

But all our pains are known to God, and can find soothing in God's loving care. That needs us to let go of our protective armour, and to come to God like a little child, as Jesus taught us. To acknowledge our griefs and vulnerabilities and fears, perhaps shed some long-held-back tears, and prayerfully to let ourselves snuggle into God's arms.

Draw near to God in company with Mary the Mother of our Lord, and mother of us all.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Canterbury Press, 2007) page 77.