

John 19:25-27

Four days ago, I stood down there and watched my mother's coffin leave the cathedral. Thanks to Paul, who had to learn it, she was swept out on a surge of Wagnerian confidence, the *Prelude* from *Meistersingers*. That was for her benefit, not mine. My mother loved Wagner, she used to tell me that The Ring Cycle was the highest form of art, and I used to pull faces. She liked her music big and romantic. I have been looking at the CDs I brought away from her room – Mahler, Brahms, Prokofiev. She liked history with drums and flags, the Civil War, The Armada, Prince Rupert, Wellington.

I have been thinking about my mother - of course I have. Actually, I have been thinking about her *again*. I have been thinking differently. One of the odd effects of her dementia was that it was not just her memory that was impaired. I could not show her a picture from fifty years ago and ask her who was in it. I could not ask her about my childhood, or hers.

Before you begin to think this is all a bit close to the bone so close to her funeral, perhaps I should explain. My mother had lost her past pretty comprehensively. She was married for sixty years, but could not remember that. Telling her a story, three weeks I referred to my father. She looked blank, I pointed at his photograph and said, 'Michael, your husband, my father...'. She grinned, impishly, and said, 'He was your father? So why were you keeping that a secret?' She was also losing the power of speech, she could not find the words she wanted and conversations proceeded by guesswork or just petered out. Frankly it was pretty miserable and my mother told me over and over again that she wanted to die. This was a good death and a welcome death. It is not comfortable, of course it is not comfortable, but this chapter in her story needed this ending.

And now, because we are both released from the small room she inhabited, from the life that was getting smaller and smaller, I can think about her *again*. I can begin to see her more clearly.

And this morning that business of seeing clearly, is really important.

Let's change gear. The gospel reading today, one of the readings set for Mothering Sunday. It directed our attention to Jesus' mother, Mary,

standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Four women and one man, John, the beloved disciple, *near* the cross. Right *under* the cross were the soldiers dicing for his tunic. John is writing carefully of the two groups - we are supposed to understand that it is 'on the one hand' those soldiers and 'on the other hand' these women. Compare and contrast, the soldiers paying a game, the women absorbed in the horror. They watch, they pay attention to the agony.

It is all about *seeing*.

Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved

Then our translation let us down a bit. What we got was Jesus saying,

"Woman, here is your son." ... "Here is your mother."

What he said was 'Look'. 'Woman, behold your son... Behold your mother'.

John has already told us,

I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John 12:32

That has begun, these three women and one man drawn to the cross. What we have here is the beginning of the church. Jesus drawing all people to himself. Here in this horrified clutch of people near the cross. The church begins at the foot of the cross. That is one of the things we are supposed to know. It is the journey we have to make, salvation lies the other side of the cross.

It is something else, though, that we should think about today. It is this business of *looking*. Jesus sees his mother, he tells his mother 'behold', *look*. Jesus, Mary and John caught in that triangular gaze. *Look*, 'behold'. They see each other, they *really* see each other.

I worry about mother's day, it is a good thing to do, but there is a concern. On Friday, the Church of England reported the results of a survey to find the ideal mother. We make motherhood wonderful and then we make it impossible and unreal. Four per cent of those asked named their own mother, as the ideal mother, but five per cent thought it was Diana Princess of Wales. The *ideal* mother? Really? What would the *ideal* Dean look like - for all time and all places? And just suppose you found such a paragon which of would want to have a cup of coffee with him or her? I had to preach to Rowan Williams a few weeks ago, it was fine, but I did feel slightly second rate. I am very glad I never had the *ideal* mother.

It is not an ideal we need. What we do need is to see clearly. I am on uncertain ground here; I am not any kind of expert on motherhood. I am a father and one of the things I remember about my children - especially when they were small - was the intensity of their gaze. I think it is that might be even more true of motherhood. Not always, but quite often, a mother and a small child have looked at one another, they have really looked. Think of those paintings of Virgin and child and their mutual gaze. The business of looking, the significant business of seeing someone else, seeing *otherness* begins for many of us with our mothers.

There is a rather startling wedding sermon by Rowan Williams, startling because, given that it was a wedding, it was serious and intense. He talked about the lifting of a veil, at an old-fashioned wedding, and about bride and groom looking at one another

Unveiling, undeception, clear and just vision... because there can be no love without truth. Without clear vision love...is a fantasy. And there can be no truth without love. Without trust and tenderness and courtesy, truth will vanish, behind the walls of fear and pain.

That has to be right love and truth. Not an ideal mother, absolutely not the terrible conceit of an idea mother, but love and truth. The steady gaze near the cross that takes in all that could be seen there and does not turn away. Love and truth.

I know this is a slightly odd sermon for Mothering Sunday. This is an odd week for me. I do think that our church began at the foot of the cross as Christ, Mary and John looked steadily

at one another. I do think I am free now to look at my own mother again. I can and will remember that she loved me. I shall tell the truth about a relationship that was not frankly, ideal. I am free to remember that she was not an ideal mother, but she did help me to see that there is otherness in the world.

Children and mothers, children and fathers, brothers and sisters, lovers, friends, when they see one another know that they are not the centre of the turning world. We can see and be seen, not just by mother, but by God, who knows the truth of me and will love me still

Making my mother ideal, trying to be ideal myself is a fool's errand, it will always be a lie. It is truth that makes love possible and it is love makes the truth bearable. Truth and love for my mother, for me, for you.

So on my first Mothering Sunday without my mother, thanks for the Wagner, and the drums and flags of history, and the big piano concertos, and the books she read and let me notice too her faults and foibles. The truth that makes love possible and the love that makes truth bearable.