

10.30pm 27th March 2022 Cathedral

Mothering Sunday

1 Sam 1.20-end
John 19: 25b-27

²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' *²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'*
John 19.26 – 27a

✚ May my words and your hearing be in the hands of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

A year ago we had never heard of Mariupol, today when it has been blasted off the face of the earth we know of its former existence. It was a city with a population over 400,000 in 2021 which was largely Russian speaking, but ethnically had an even divide between Russian and Ukrainian heritage people with a significant Greek minority.

There are only 10 cities bigger than Mariupol in the UK and just for comparison it was almost the size of Edinburgh.

The city is home to a *Hodegetria icon* an image of Mary as '*She who shows the Way*', in other words it shows the Virgin Mary holds the Christ-child, pointing to him as the way of salvation, much like this icon from Kyiv.

A fortnight ago (10/3), Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk said, and I quote:

'... we see mass murder in the besieged city of Mariupol. This city, which was founded by the Greek community as the 'City of Mary,' has been transformed into a cemetery for tens of thousands of people.'

'The City of Mary' has become 'The City of the dead' – a Necropolis. Only 100,000 people remain in the city, yet that's still more than the population of the Isle of Man who are caught in extreme suffering.

So why have I begun this way on Mothering Sunday. Surely mothering is about all the good relationships that we have with our mothers, both parent and church – we don't want all this about destruction.

However, our Gospel today is all about being caught up with pain of Mary and motherhood.

Mary stands in agony at the foot of the cross and she looks on her son dying before her. The women of Mariupol, The City of our Lady are in agony as they make the decision to either stay as their sons, brothers or fathers go to War or to decide to flee with all the uncertainty of a refugee.

(sorry we have been told not to use this word WAR, so I will use a more correct word – Fratricide).

Mary already had known what it was to suffer. Let's recall a few incidents and events:

- Mary had to explain things to Joseph about the visit of an angel and her pregnancy (Matt 1.18ff)
- There was the challenge of a birth far from family and friend in a stable (Luke 2.4)
- There was the hasty flight to Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod. (Matt 2.13)
- There was the pain of Mary calling for her son and hearing the response '*who is my mother and brothers*' – opening the flood gates to all of us claiming a place every bit as intimate as Mary in his reply (Matt 12.48-50)

- And now here, at the foot of the cross, she watches her son being crucified for a crime he has not committed. (John 19.25b-27)

We can't even begin to imagine the pain in her heart, just as we can't begin to imagine the pain of the people of the Ukraine experiencing genocide at the hands of the Russian State for the second time in under 100 years – last time it was Stalin in 1932-33 who starved to death 6 million Ukrainians' in what is known as the Holodomor or Terror famine.

I would like to remind ourselves that mid-way between Christmas and Easter we celebrated Candlemass on February 2nd, when we think of Jesus being presented in the Temple. You will remember that when Simeon had seen Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:34) Simeon says to Mary:

*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and **a sword will pierce your own soul too.***

Perhaps at the foot of the cross 33 years later, Simeon's prophecy echoed in her ears.

Parents, of course, experience anguish over their children many times throughout their lives. Some have lost children. For those in that position, Mary can be an important figure of compassion and solidarity as one who identifies with that unbearable pain.

As Mary thinks about her son, so Jesus thinks about his mother. He knows how much she is suffering and despite his own suffering, he identifies with her pain and aloneness.

There is no mention of Joseph in the scripture beyond the time when Jesus at the age of 12 got parted from his family on the visit to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Every time Mary is mentioned subsequently, for example, at the wedding of Cana in Galilee - there is never any mention of Joseph, who, presumably had died.

Jesus knew her agony and he was aware that, after his own death, there would be no-one to care for his mother, so Jesus speaks to his mother:

*'Woman, here is your son.'*²⁷

Then he says to John, *'Here is your mother.'*

John 19.26b – 27a

Even in his dying moments, Jesus' concern was for the future well-being of his family.

There is something quite profound about what Mary and the disciple John represent to us here, because here are two people who stick with Jesus to the bitter end. This contrasts with the rest of his disciples who have fled.

Here at the foot of the cross Jesus is establishing a new relationship. Through the blood of Christ shed for us, a new home, a new community comes to life. A new family is born.

It is here, at the foot of the cross, as Jesus blood is shed and a woman and a disciple embrace - it is here that the church is formed!

As we celebrate the Eucharist today and share the body and blood of Christ. Here we share the work that Jesus started that day. As we take bread and wine, we are proclaiming the same truth that was acted out that first Good Friday.

- Here, at the Cathedral, is a new family.
- Here, at the Cathedral, a new relationship.

- Here, at the Cathedral, let us hope, we can welcome Ukrainians' into our midst

We are blood relatives - not genetically, but through Jesus' blood, shed on the cross for all.

Mary and John formed the church in their relationship with each other. They offered one another comfort. They strengthened each other. They encouraged one another and shared hospitality together.

These, surely, must be the hallmarks of our church today: Love, Comfort, Support and Hospitality. This is what Jesus had in mind when he formed the church from the Cross that first Good Friday. And that church would be the home from which we share the good news that Christ offers. We are all one through his blood.

Mothering Sunday is therefore a time to celebrate the love of those who have mothered and nurtured us and I mean that whatever the gender. It is a time to celebrate the love of our carers throughout the years. But it is also a time to give thanks for Mother Church, formed in the blood of Christ at the foot of the cross.

Today, we are grateful for our blood relatives - who share the same DNA as we do and our blood relatives who share the same faith in Christ.

In our conversations and behaviour today, let's be sure to celebrate all those we love with thankful hearts and as we reflect on Mary's agony, reflect on the agony of the city that bears her name - Mariupol

+ **Amen**