

Sermon - Our Lady of Comfort

In celebration of Mary, Mother of our Lord.

What we know about Mary

- As we celebrate the feast of Mary, Mother of our Lord, it is good to remember the moments that the Gospel writers - particularly Luke - bring her to our attention.
- In addition to the Gospel passage we've just heard, there are descriptions:
 1. of Mary visiting Elizabeth - during which she praised God, with words similar to our first hymn;
 2. of Mary giving birth to Jesus, and then being visited by shepherds and wise men;
 3. of Mary and Joseph presenting the infant Jesus in the temple;
 4. of Mary and Joseph going back to collect twelve year old Jesus from the temple, after he had stayed behind when they had thought he was travelling home in the group with them;
 5. of Mary encouraging Jesus to help out with the wine during the wedding feast in Cana;
 6. of Mary being concerned for Jesus when he was besieged by crowds and opposed by religious leaders;
 7. of Mary gazing up at Jesus on the cross as he hung there, dying; and
 8. of Mary praying regularly with the apostles after Jesus' resurrection.

Marian titles

- And in the age-old traditions of the Church, Mary has been accorded various titles, such as the Blessed Virgin Mary; the New or Second Eve; the Queen of Angels; Our Lady, Star of the Sea; Mystic Rose; and - one of my personal favourites - Theotokos or God-bearer.
- All of the various titles emphasise aspects of what Mary, the Mother of our Lord, might represent for Christians in their devotional faith.
- While some of these titles might seem un-Biblical or theologically suspicious, many Christians find that one or more of these descriptions can encourage them in their devotion to Jesus, Mary's Son, or in their devotion to God, who honoured Mary's own devotion.

The first Christian

- Even if some of Mary's many traditional titles and descriptions might seem romantic or poetic, I think it helpful to recognise Mary as the archetype Christian - as the first believer in Jesus as the Christ.
- Every Christian can look to Mary in her faithful devotion to God, and the giving of herself in a way that can be more accessible to us than the way that Jesus gave of himself.
- After all, not everyone is called to martyrdom, or to sacrificing their lives in order to save the lives of others, in the way that we might understand Jesus to have done.
- And yet we are all called to give of ourselves so that others' lives may be nurtured and blessed, in the way that Mary did for Jesus.
- As his mother, the baby Jesus was nurtured in her womb, and the infant Jesus was fed from her breast.

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- Mary, along with Joseph, would have done what any good parent does, and taught him, fed him, clothed him, and loved him.
- When we look seriously at the kind of man Jesus was, we should be able to recognise that he would have been reflecting to a great degree the kind of people his parents were.
- His character was as a result of the nurturing and giving of themselves that Mary and Joseph did.

Concern for our loved ones

- The aspect of Mary that I would like to particularly draw your attention to today is the more hidden side of her role as Jesus' mother, from after his baptism for the three years of his ministry.
- Apart from John's account of the wedding feast at Cana, elsewhere in the Gospel accounts the mother of the adult Jesus occupies a difficult and distressing role.
- As Jesus went about his teaching and ministering, so he found himself being mobbed by crowds who wanted his blessings and miracles as much as they wanted his teaching.
- We have heard in the Gospel readings from recent Sundays of how even when Jesus tried to have a break and some respite from his ministry, people would crowd him.
- No wonder that the Gospels also talk of Mary, out of concern for the safety of her Son, coming to find him to persuade him to return home so that he wouldn't burn out.
- Mary was being the kind of parent who remains concerned for the wellbeing of their independent adult children, wanting them to be looked after and their needs met.
- Throughout the Gospel accounts we also hear of Jesus increasingly coming into conflict with religious leaders, who demonise him and insult him, and reject him and try to kill him.
- For those of us who have loved ones who are subjected to any of these kinds of treatment, we know that such incidents can give us a lot of anxiety and concern for those we care about.
- Not just family, but friends, or anyone whose wellbeing we care about.
- I don't know about you, but when I see someone I care about being insulted or disrespected, or being treated unjustly, then I become anxious for them.
- This is what Mary had to endure as she watched her Son being insulted, disrespected, and treated unjustly - especially by those who should have known better.

My son, my son

- And then of course the worst happened.
- Finally her own Son was arrested, tried, and flogged.
- We don't know for certain, but it seems likely that Mary was in a position to witness some of this abuse.
- This is what we understand Simeon to have been alluding to when, thirty-three years before, he said to Mary "*and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*" (NRSV Luke 2.35)

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- And, of course, those final hours at the cross, watching her Son with his broken body and laboured breathing, her boy that she had borne and carried and given so much of herself to so that he might grow up to be a man his parents would be proud of and blessed by;
- her boy with his ragged breaths, and anguished face, and bloodied body, with all his pain and suffering;
- and all she could do was stand there and hold him with her eyes, and hold him with her heart, and hold him with her mind, and hold him with her soul - because she could not hold him with her arms.
- Until his last breath, and the silence and stillness, and she could finally give expression to her grief for what had been so cruelly taken away from her.

- We do know the rest of the story.

- Nevertheless, I can't help thinking that her heart would always have borne the scars of that piercing sword when her child was killed in front of her.

The example of Mary

- So what might this part of Mary's life mean for us?
- We know that Jesus felt for others: he had compassion, and he reached out and blessed and gave and helped.
- He even cured people of their hurts and raised people from the dead.
- Mary, arguably the first Christian, the one we hold in such high esteem for her faith, her devotion, for her own giving of herself - well, we don't have any descriptions of her doing the kinds of things Jesus did.
- And yet she did the kinds of things that many of us can relate to perhaps more directly, more easily: the caring about and for others, the yearning for their wellbeing, for holding people in our hearts, for bringing people who are suffering before God.
- I think that God uses our hearts the way he used Mary's heart.
- I think God sees and honours the yearnings of our hearts when we want the suffering of others to be alleviated.
- When we reach out with hands that can't touch because we can't physically hold the other person, and all we can do is hold them perhaps with our eyes, and more certainly with our own hearts, and minds, and souls.
- And maybe - when we find ourselves in these kinds of situations - maybe we can remember Mary, the mother of our Lord, the first Christian who believed, and who was so faithful to God,
- - maybe we can allow ourselves to be comforted by Mary's own example.
- And give thanks to God for her.