

SERMON FOR LENT 4 | 19.03.2023

I Samiel 1:20-end; Colossians 3:12-17; St Luke 2:41;52

We all know that time passes incredibly quickly but I hadn't realised that this weekend marks exactly a year since Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was released from the notorious Evin jail in Iran. You will remember those first press conferences last March where she looked gaunt and stressed as she talked about what it been like to be kept away from her family for six long years.

But the bits that most touched her audiences were her references to her separation from her daughter Gabriella. We heard of how, to start with Gabriella had been allowed into the jail. But once she had turned six, there was the agonizing decision to let her return to London to begin her schooling, looked after just by her father whom she hadn't seen in years, making a new life at their house in Hampstead. We heard too of the dreadful parting from Gabriella's grandparents at Tehran airport.

Today there will be millions of wonderful Mother's Day reunions with cards, flowers and presents being given and received. This tradition goes back hundreds of years as children separated by work from their mothers, were allowed this one Sunday off to go home. The Church has also made this Refreshment/Laetare Sunday a day to celebrate 'Mother Church' too, with special services and celebrations, especially in our Cathedrals.

But I want to hold on to that relationship between Nazanin and Gabriella because in so many ways it symbolizes both the closeness and the testing that so often marks a mother-child relationship. Giving birth is the most extraordinary event in any woman's life – and yet we all know that there can be no guarantees that that bond will be pain free thereafter. We each look back on our experiences of being a daughter or a son - hopefully with some wonderful highlights to give thanks for; but also with the knowledge that it wasn't always easy and there is a feeling of loss for what might have been.

For me my over-riding memories are of my mother's generosity; she simply could not stop herself giving away what little she had. And that is also the over-riding theme that comes through our readings today. Having pleaded with God for a child, Hannah honours her pledge to send him away from home at an incredibly young age, to be brought up in the Temple by the old priest Eli and his three corrupt sons. And the same willingness to do what they believed God wanted motivated Jesus' mother Mary as - after three days of absolute frenetic searching - she discovers her son in the Temple, giving lessons to the professors gathered in the rabbinical school.

And what does she get for her trouble? Do you not know that I must be about my Father's Business? Ouch!

But surely that is what real love is about: the giving to our children in ways that will enable them to do whatever is best for them – whatever their parents might want or feel? A hundred years ago it was of course very different: children largely followed careers or took partners only if and when their parents allowed. Children were assets to be disposed of to the advantage of their parents and their families.

Today we expect those who are blessed with the care of children to display generosity, compassion and love whatever their hopes and dreams might be – and we say that is because such freedom speaks most truly of the way God parents us. But quite often our language fails to express that well enough.

One of the very first to break the God-is-a-male patriarchal register of our Church language was St Anselm. Anselm was Archbishop of Canterbury during the troubled reign of King William II, just fifty years after 1066 and all that. And this interesting prayer, put into modern form by my Durham liturgy tutor, Michael Vasey, reveals a desire to talk of the open compassion of Jesus in a new way: *Jesus, like a mother, you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children...*

***'Like a mother. Weeping over our sins and our pride, tenderly drawing us from hatred and judgement...'* And the way Anselm does that is by using a straightforward simile: Jesus is like a mother.**

But is it any wonder that, in our contemporary 21st environment, people of faith want to go further than that and say that God IS our mother not God is like our mother? Janet Morley, writing prayers thirty years ago, wanted to reflect on the kind of God who spoke to her. She writes:

***God is my strong rock in whom I trust, and all my confidence I rest in her.
When I am afraid she stays close to me,
and when I am full of terror, she does not hide her face.
To all who are weak she shows compassion
and those who are downtrodden she causes to rise.
God pities the fallen and I will love her.***

Now I appreciate that some will find this language pretty awkward – even alien. We have lived our whole lives addressing God with male pronouns.

But a new path is already being trodden as gender neutral casting dominates at the National Theatre and in other places too. And much of the motivation for that is driven by the belief that human emotions like compassion, open-ended loving and sacrificial giving are not restricted to any one gender or any one personality type. Freed from its historical base in the Old Testament, the utter trust of Hannah and the extraordinary faithfulness of Mary the Mother of Jesus in the Temple precincts, are not limited to their feminine natures but are examples, for all, of what happens when people learn to trust God wholly and completely. I have long thought that Nazarin, denied access to her daughter, pined as a human being as much as she did as a mother.

But what of those who describe themselves as feminist theologians, people like Frances Young, Mary Daley and Elizabeth Schlusser Fiorenza? I can say with absolute certainty that they would take the above summary as utterly naïve and ‘altogether male’. You simply cannot say ‘freed from the historical base of the Old Testament’. The patriarchal approach to the nature of God as revealed in the Old Testament has dominated for far too long. Frances Young would want to say that her understanding of how God meets us in our suffering and in our lingering traumas is something that has arisen, in very large measure, from her experience of being not just a parent but a mother.

Rita Brock’s thesis is that our experience of God has to take far more account of the way women’s insights on abuse and power have been sidelined; and Elizabeth Fiorenza contends that the male search for objectivity and neutrality doesn’t take sufficient notice of the social and historical baggage we all carry into our study of the Bible; we need, she says, to be liberated from the idea that little by little we are inching towards the truth. Like all family life, she says, we often repeat the same mistakes over and over. Men like to think in terms of a progress along a line; women tend to believe that wisdom is much more relational and much more like the progress of an Archimedes screw.

And, much though I like the idea that our emotional attachments and insights are not limited by our gender – each of us are, after all, somewhere along a spectrum in terms of our gender makeup - I have to concede that the ways we experience the presence of God will be very different for each of us.

And so we give thanks to God for both St Anselm and for Janet Morley for drawing our attention, through the reference to mothering, to the need to delight in the tender compassion of our God: *Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you...* And in so doing we celebrate the divine gifts that we have seen in our own mothers for which – today - we give special thanks.