

Happy Mother's Day to those who bore us, to those who raised us, to those who protected, nurtured, comforted, corrected, and loved us, whoever they might be.

How appropriate on this Mother's Day that we read what is known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, his farewell prayer on behalf of his disciples, the prayer that he says just before he leaves the scene of the Last Supper to go the garden where he will be arrested.

If you listen to the words of the prayer and ignore the theological content – which I grant you is not easy to do – you could hear in this prayer the same prayer that any mother might say for her child as this child goes out into the world.

Jesus prays for his disciples because he is going to leave them. He is going to leave them and his death is going to terrify them. He is going to leave this less than inspired band of disciples who still don't understand what he has been trying to teach them. He is going to leave them knowing that they are weak and that some of them will be faithless, some of them will deny him and some of them will run away. Jesus prays for them because he has given them over to God. He prays for them because what he has taught the disciples about God will make them outsiders. Jesus protected them in the name of God and he guarded them. He asks for God's protection because without him they will be vulnerable. Jesus knows that they will have a hard time in the world and he asks God to protect them from the evil one. He is sending them into the world with a mission, so he asks God's blessing that they might be sanctified, made holy. Jesus prays for them because he loves them.

There is an element of pain and grief in this prayer – not so much that Jesus doesn't believe that God will protect his disciples, those whom he has now named as friends, but grief in letting go, the grief of a mother watching her child leave for college, or the military, or a job away from the place he or she has grown up, or at even at the wedding, giving over the emotional care of her child into the care of another, or into a way of life or belief that is not the one in which they were raised. There is pride of course, and joy, but there is also loss.

This is Jesus as our Mother. In the next verse Jesus will pray for us as well. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one". (Joh 17:20)

Are you thinking to yourself this may be love but it is not the love of a mother, or is it too weird to think of Jesus as a mother?

Jesus has actually referred himself to a mother, in the gospel of Luke he says "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luk 13:34 NRS)

How's that for an image? Jesus as a chicken, Jesus as a mother hen. If you have ever seen a hen brooding over her eggs you know that the image complements our reading this morning!

And if Jesus as a mother hen doesn't work for you, did you know that one of the early Christian images for Jesus was as a mother pelican? In ancient mythology when food was scarce the mother pelican was thought to be willing to pierce her breast and use her own blood to

feed her young chicks. This action was compared to Jesus being willing to offer himself in sacrifice for us all which we recall each week in the Eucharist when we eat his body and drink his blood. Remember too that in baptism we are born again through Christ, we are the children of God because of Christ, and we share in the love of God the Father because of our Mother Jesus Christ.

Perhaps more compelling than these animal metaphors are the writings of the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich whose feast days is May 8th, appropriately close to Mother's Day.

Dame Julian was an anchoress. An anchoress was a holy woman who was set apart from the world for prayer and communion with God, to develop holiness of life. Julian herself lived in a cell next to the church of St. Julian in Norwich, England. Not much is known about her personal life – not even her name which scholars believe was simple take from the name of the church. Dame Julian lived and prayed on behalf of others, she spoke with visitors who came to her for guidance and prayer through a window in her cell. Her only companion was a cat. She became very ill and had a series of visions of Jesus. She recorded these visions in a manuscript called the *Revelation of Divine Love* and after many years they became available to the public. Her theology is grounded in the understanding that God wants nothing more than for us to be reconciled to him. She was the first woman known to write in English instead of Latin. She is one of England's most important mystics and her work became popular again in the 1970's.

The most significant references to Jesus as Mother occur in Chapters 59-63.

Reflecting on the nature of sin she writes:

“For this is that property of God which opposed good to evil. So Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil is our true Mother. We have our being from him where the foundations of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows...And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking our created nature. All the lovely works and all the sweet loving offices of beloved motherhood are appropriated to the second person, for in him we have this Godly will, whole and safe forever both in nature and in grace, from his own goodness proper to him. I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God, The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is his taking of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work. (59)

The mother's service is nearest, readiest and surest: nearest because it is most natural, readiest because it is most loving, and surest because it is truest. No one ever might or could perform this office fully, except only him. We know that all our mothers bear us for pain and for death. O what is that? But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. (60)

As Julian continues to weave this image of Jesus and motherhood, she also refers to God as father and brings their roles together in the name of grace, and love, and forgiveness.

My own mother was particularly fond of Dame Julian and I remember reading passages from the Revelations at her funeral. Fittingly enough her tombstone is inscribed with one of

Julian's best known sayings in which she is reassured by Christ that sin will not prevail, the world will not be condemned, and love will triumph over evil.

Jesus says to her "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." And if that doesn't come up the comfort of a mother's love, I don't know what does.

Happy Mother's Day!

Quotations from Julian of Norwich Showings trans. Edmund College O.S.A. and James Walsh, S.J, Paulist Press, NY, 1978