

**St Mary's, Rickmansworth  
Patronal Festival and 750th Anniversary of the Church**

**13 September 2020**

**Isaiah 49.13-16 and Luke 1. 46-55**

My text is from Isaiah 49: *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I [the Lord] will never forget you”*.

It's lovely to be with you at St Mary's, even if many members of the congregation cannot be here in person this morning. Our service brings together two different themes: the celebration of your patronal feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the 750th anniversary of your church building.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is an extraordinary young woman, which is why there are five days each year when we mark different aspects of her life. Her birth – or nativity - is what we celebrate today. No other saint or martyr gets five different feasts each year. So what is it about her that is special? Well, today's Gospel reading reminds us of her total and complete dependence upon God and upon God's love: “the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name”. As St Bernard put it: "Divine love penetrated and filled the soul of Mary to such an extent that no part of her was left untouched. She loved with her whole heart, with her whole soul, with her whole strength, and she was full of grace”.

So Mary gives us a powerful and unique insight into the nature of God's love for us - for humanly speaking, there is nothing stronger than a mother's love, as Isaiah reminds us: *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I [the Lord] will never forget you”*.

This sort of love is not something weak or sentimental. A mother's love is ready to sacrifice everything. This is the sort of love which laments and grieves when their child settles for second best. This is the sort of love that is always there for her young one. But this is also the sort of love that knows that it cannot force anything. It has to give the child real space to grow. This is the love that bears the sadness of seeing a child leave home and which doesn't try to hold onto him or her. This love watches and waits and longs.

And that's what God's love is like. The God who sent his son to give himself in complete and utter self-sacrifice on the cross. This is the love that cries out in longing: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I longed to gather you as a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you not willing”. This is the love which ‘bears all things, hopes all things and endures all things’. It is the ‘love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all’.

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A mother's love is the sort of love which is there at the beginning of all things – at the beginning of life itself. It is the love which nurtures, the love which cares. One of the most powerful images in history is that of Mary tenderly holding her new born baby.

I guess for many of us, that sense of a mother's love is something which is special and powerful. Some of my earliest memories are of my mother's care for me when I was a child: of picking me up when I'd hurt myself; of worrying that I hadn't eaten enough, or I was going out without a coat and I would be cold; of coming up to my bedroom to tuck me in; and, as she knelt by my bed in the darkness, praying with me. Until the day she died, at the grand old age of 93, my mother was always there for me, always concerned, always caring, always hoping, always praying for my good. And that's what God does.

But in the Gospels we find Mary present, watching and waiting in loving care, not just at the beginning of Jesus' life – but also at the end. In the passages which describe Jesus' crucifixion, we find most of the disciples have fled in fear of their lives. But we read: *'Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene'.*

She is standing a little way away watching. Clearly she cannot fully understand what is going on. Indeed, on a human level, it must have seemed the most appalling tragedy as her son is executed in front of her very eyes. But she stays there. She watches and she waits, even when her son is suffering. And then, after his death, she comes to bury him and to tend his broken body. That's a mother's love and it is the nearest thing humanly that we can compare with God's love. For He is with us even when we suffer and we cannot understand why.

And it is this sort of love that is at the heart of the church which is truly living out its vocation. In other words, we are not just here to be passive recipients of God's love – we are called to imitate it, to copy it. One of the best parts of being a bishop is travelling around the diocese across Beds and Herts. What is so encouraging is the huge groundswell of Christian engagement with food banks, credit unions, lunch clubs, visitors for the housebound, charities working with those who have addictions or are migrants, even during the lockdown of Covid-19. We have churches which are welcoming Syrian refugees, and others which send out street pastors week by week. And then there is the generosity in finances. So many of our churches have been raising funds for my annual Harvest Appeal. In fact, last year, churches in this diocese - after they'd raised all the money needed to pay their bills - gave away over £2.2m to other charities.

As we give thanks for the past 750 years of this church, we mustn't just look backwards with a warm glow of nostalgia. We must also look forwards to what lies ahead. Our celebrations will be hollow unless we pray for God's grace and God's courage to living out this love among our families and friends, in our workplaces, schools and local communities. It's why at the end of our service we say: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord".

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+Alan St Albans