

Homily

“Woman here is your son”

I wonder how these words echoed in Mary’s mind after the dreadful events of Jesus death, as she held his body after it had been taken down from the cross.

For me these images are far from the blue robed virgin of many church traditions and so there is something very complicated about preaching about Mary. Mary has been taken out of the short pieces of scripture that are written about her and a whole hagiography, set of myths, has grown up around her.

In this way you can find her under many different titles – The blessed Virgin Mary, Madonna, Our Lady, Blessed Mother, Mary of Nazareth and 50 or so other names or titles. For me there seems to be something of a gulf between The Blessed Virgin Mary and plain Mary of Nazareth.

Looking at our gospel reading this morning, the writer of John’s gospel often used allegory or symbolism to reveal a deeper meaning. It is only in John’s gospel that the beloved disciple is mentioned at the foot of the cross, more generally it is noted that all the male disciples had fled. Would the women have been allowed to stand at the foot of the cross, close enough to hear Jesus’ words? To add to the mystery although Mary and the disciple are said to be there they are not mentioned by name, we have to accept that ‘Woman’ is Mary.

So we can read this as Jesus final caring act for Mary his mother, to give her a protector whom he trusted or, as some scholars suggest this is symbolic and Jesus is creating a new family – a community, with Mary standing for the mother of the church, the community of believers, and the beloved disciple as Jesus ideal follower. And we can see how Mary could be seen as Mother of the church, indeed in the Roman Catholic church this has been a more recently acquired title for her.

For many years woman have struggled with Mary’s role within the church. Held up as an archytype of womanhood – untouchable, held in reverence but with very little agency of her own. In a church that is hierarchical and patriarchial there are questions to be asked about how Mary was thrust forward in this way as the true role for women.

Here I am not saying that Mary was not the most important woman in history, but that the way her story has been projected onto all women has caused harm. In history God has been pressing the Israelites towards a complete openness and vulnerability that will 'clear a space' for renewing grace to flow freely. Mary puts herself completely at God's disposal and the new life beginning in her body is a life in which God's Word is indeed set free, given space to work in the world and make it new. The Holy Spirit 'overshadows' Mary so that the child she gives birth to is an embodiment of creative holiness, The Word made flesh.

Mary of Nazareth holy, virtuous, seeking God's will in her life and chosen to bare God's son. Throughout her life she is faithful to her initial YES through all the difficulty and potential shame surrounding Jesus' birth, through the anxieties she must have suffered during his turbulent ministry, and finally here she is at the foot of the cross watching him die. Still her YES is strong and true.

When I read this passage – usually around Eastertide, I think of the other mothers who have suffered the death of a son or daughter. Doreen Lawrence often comes to mind, how she has suffered at the hands of racism and patriarchy. Always described as 'dignified' a truth seems to somehow set her at a distance, to sum her up and so to silence her. This morning we think too of the mother of young Sophie Martyn, shot in Plymouth and all mothers who have lived to mourn the death of their children.

Woman, says Jesus – just that so I want to set free The Blessed Virgin Mary free from her imagined blue robes and white face, for her to be seen as a most remarkable woman, native of Nazareth, living and breathing, Mother of Jesus, faithful disciple.

Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinner now, and at the hour of our death. Amen