

Don't wake the baby
Margaret Joachim

Mothering Sunday, 14/3/21

Somehow I don't think the readings in the lectionary for today were chosen by women. There are two sets. Both Old Testament readings (which we're not having) are about women giving their children away to be brought up by other people. One New Testament reading is about affliction and consolation; the other (which we heard) sets an almost impossible standard of behaviour. The gospel extracts show Mary in discouraging or tragic circumstances. Given that we are apparently celebrating motherhood, they are hardly good advertisements for the role. Though I suppose, given that very early in Genesis we have been told that: 'in sorrow you shall bring forth children', we have been warned.

If they'd asked me, which of course would never happen, I would have had different suggestions. Maybe the definition of motherhood as 'cooking breakfast while counting out the dinner money, looking for the other gym shoe, knocking up a shepherd's costume and concocting a plausible "off games" note'. I'd have added Jilly Cooper's all-purpose guide to parental decision-making: 'What would the coroner say?' And it would certainly have included this:

And God Created Mothers, by Erma Bombeck

When the good Lord was creating mothers, he was into his sixth day of overtime when an angel appeared and said: 'You're doing a lot of fiddling around on this one.'

And the Lord said: 'Have you read the specification on this order? She has to be completely washable but not plastic, have 180 movable parts all replaceable, run on black coffee and left-overs, have a lap which disappears when she stands up, a kiss that can cure anything from a broken leg to a disappointed love affair – and six pairs of hands.'

The angel shook her head slowly and said: 'Six pairs of hands? No way'.

'It's not the hands that are causing me problems', said the Lord. 'It's the three pairs of eyes that mothers have to have.'

'That's on the standard model?' asked the angel.

The Lord nodded. 'One pair that sees through closed doors when she asks 'What are you children doing in there?' when she already knows. Another in the back of her head that sees what she shouldn't but what she needs to know. And of course the ones in front that can look at a child when he gets himself into trouble and say 'I understand and I love you' without so much as uttering a word.'

'Lord', said the angel, toughing his arm gently, 'go to bed. Tomorrow is another...'

'I can't', said the Lord. 'I'm so close now. Already I have one who heals herself when she is sick, can feed a family of six on one pound of mince, and can get a nine-year-old to have a bath.'

The angel circled the model of a mother very slowly. 'It's too soft,' she sighed.

'But tough!' said the Lord excitedly. 'You cannot imagine what this mother can do or endure.'

'Can it think?'

'Not only think, but it can reason and compromise,' said the Creator.

Finally the angel bent over and ran her fingers across the cheek. 'There's a leak', she pronounced.

'It's not a leak', said the Lord, 'it's a tear.'

'What's it for?'

'It's for joy, sadness, disappointment, pain, exhaustion, loneliness and pride.'

'You are a genius', said the angel.

The Lord looked sombre. 'I didn't put it there'.

One of the best descriptions of motherhood I know: joy, sadness, disappointment, pain, exhaustion, loneliness and pride.

All of us who are parents will have experienced that time when our infuriating child has gone for a sleepover with a friend or has stayed with a relative, and when they are handed back to us the other parent tells us how polite, helpful and well-behaved they have been. Just like Mary and Joseph, we are amazed at what is being said about our child. It's true - our children are so close to us that we can't help bringing out the worst in each other. But we bring out the best, too. When children come to be baptised, their parents promise to pray for them, set them an example and care for them; they say: 'With the help of God, we will.' With the help of God we can navigate our way through all the difficulties, no matter how hopeless, powerless, frustrated or incompetent we may feel at any particular time. Eventually most parents will look back and find that they have done a reasonable job. We have raised decent, honest, hard-working, responsible human beings who are a pleasure to be with and in whom we can take real pride. It takes compassion, kindness, patience, humility and forgiveness, as St Paul reminds us in our first reading. Above all, as he goes on to say, it takes love. With the help of God, and with the love of God, we can. His love for us, and ours for him.

I was doing my best to avoid mentioning the pandemic today, but it has snuck up on me. Our traditional church acknowledgement of mothers (and grandmothers, sisters and aunts, all of whom are part of the network) isn't possible. We can't give you the daffodils. I hope someone else has. And I hope that other tradition – taking Mum out to enjoy a meal she hasn't had to cook herself – will be honoured just as soon as possible. Maybe Dad is cooking today? The statistics tell us that women's lives have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic – more of us are at-risk front-line workers, more have been furloughed or lost their jobs, more are juggling childcare, home-schooling and working from home, more have had to manage on severely reduced incomes. We're a resilient crowd. We're hacking it, one way or another. But a little appreciation is always welcome, and today's a good day for that. So please, find a creative, Covid-secure way to say thank you to the woman who, in a reading I would have chosen, 'is clothed in strength and dignity, who opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue....and whose children rise up and call her happy'. But please go easy when singing all those psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. You might wake the baby.