

As a mother comforts her child,  
so I will comfort you;  
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

*Isa 66:13*

Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, known as Mothering Sunday. In the early Church, this was a Sunday when people would return to the Church where their Christian journey began, their place of baptism, or the place where they first came to faith. It was if you like their Mother Church. In that regard I would have fond memories of St Lawrence's Church in Northfield, in Birmingham. In the prayers this morning I will certainly be thinking of the Parish of St Lawrence and of the Rector at the time, Bruce Morton who drew a rather nervous, questioning teenager into the faith.

But it is of course also a Sunday where we give particular thanks for our mothers, those who brought us to birth and loved us through the ups and downs of our early years. I want to begin with three particular images of motherhood, two from just this past week and one from my time in Ahoghill. Through these, I want to reflect on how these images of motherhood, of the feminine, can deepen our understanding of the God we worship.

The first came as I was sitting in the waiting room in Sutton Cross Surgery. Sitting across from me was a young mother with her infant child. The child was trying to play with one of the toys in the waiting room and the mother was gently guiding her child, not rushing, talking in language appropriate to her child – I thought of God coming alongside us, guiding us, encouraging us, revealing himself in the ordinary, in the everyday.

Shortly after that, while I was waiting for a prescription to be made up, I slipped into Supervalu to get something for my tea and met a young mother awaiting the birth of her next child and we began talking about the different stages her children were at. Her five year old is in Senior Infants. She is at that lovely age when everything her teacher Mrs Anderson says is holy writ. Mrs Anderson talks of the value of blueberries and blueberries have to be bought and eaten with relish. Her other child is a few years older and a few days earlier he had been due to take part in a GAA game. Could he find his gum shield? Who was to blame for this – mother of course. As we talked on I could see that she was not letting him away with anything but she was aware that he was at **that** stage and part of her role was helping him navigate through the impending years to maturity (when he is about 45 years of age) – I thought of God with us in our frustrations when things aren't going well, with us when we don't acknowledge his goodness, when we rebel – he is there, even when we don't acknowledge him, even when we don't want him around.

Then I thought back to a mother in Ahoghill. A woman who had faced a long battle with cancer, she gave a wonderful warm Christian witness in the Parish and in the village. Out of the blue, she learned that her son had become addicted to heroine. As in all these cases there was repeated petty theft until she did what she knew she would have to do and reported him to the police. I was with her a couple of days later as she spoke of her pain as she watched him being taken from the house in a police car. She voiced her concern that maybe that in his choice of lifestyle he had put himself beyond the love of God. I remember asking her whether she could ever imagine her not loving her son.

She thought and smiled and said no and we recalled the words ‘Can a mother ever forget the child she bore – then neither will I forget you.’ God never giving up on me, God ever ready to welcome back a wayward child. There is a wonderful truth in those words; ‘There is nothing I can do that will make God love me more and there is nothing I can do that will make God love me less.’

There is nothing radically different in the insights into God that I have offered here – what we have done is to approach them through the image of mother, of the feminine. There are feminine images running through the Old Testament. We begin with God the Creator in the first creation narrative in in the first chapter:

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. *Gen 1:26,27*

Listen to the text. ‘Let us make humankind in our image.....in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. Then there is the passage that I quoted at the outset:

As a mother comforts her child,  
so I will comfort you;  
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

*Isa 66:13*

The purely male does not do justice to the fullness of the image of God that we find in the Old Testament. As I thought about that, I began thinking afresh about some of the things we have been thinking about God over the last couple

of weeks in the context of the Covenant relationship between God and his people. Remember we were talking of the God of new beginnings, of fresh starts.

As I thought over the God of new beginnings in the context of those images of motherhood I came across this week, that I remembered from Ahoghill; I thought of the mother who gently guides her child; the mother who understands and continues to love a child who is getting to that humpy and defiant stage in life; the mother who knows she can never stop loving a son who has hurt and disappointed her. I recall with thanksgiving my own mother. In and through those images and memories of motherhood, I get a deeper insight into the love of the God who made me, who redeemed me and who strengthens and inspires me in the Spirit.

As a mother comforts her child,  
so I will comfort you;