

“Can a mother forget?”
A Sermon for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
St Mary the Virgin, Crousetown
August 16, 2009 at Evensong

“Can a mother forget her sucking child that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.” (Isaiah 49:15-16)

In the three decades since I last had the privilege of speaking to you here on the Patronal (should we say Maternal?) Festival of St Mary the Virgin, I have, like a figure at the beginning of the Book of Job, been “going to and fro in the earth.” Perhaps because I am so personally attached to this church, I have treasured my many encounters with the Virgin Mother to which it is dedicated. To speak of all these and of the diverse faces of the Mother of God revealed would take years. This evening I want to think with you about her power to gather and to care for each and all.

The first encounter which showed Mary’s power to gather the children of God occurred in the beautiful old town of Wolfenbüttel, Germany. There, on the main square, stands the first church built in Germany after the Protestant Reformation. The Great Church of the city, and of the Lutheran diocese of Brunswick, is dedicated, in Latin, as the church “De Beatae Mariae Virginis,” that is, as our church, of St Mary the Virgin. Its splendidly ornate interior is filled with images of Our Lord, his Mother and the Apostles. When we remember that the other great reformer, Jean Calvin, declared those who denied the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be “mad dogs,” we are reminded that the Virgin Mother gathers Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians under her wings.

The strength with which our Holy Mother still draws Catholics under the care of God was brought home to me last Good Friday in Palermo, Sicily. On that day, the compassionate mother of my text from Isaiah, faithful to her son being executed as a criminal outside the city wall, deserted by all his male apostles except John, compelled reverence. On Good Friday, seven societies based in churches of the city, carry heavy floats through the different districts. All are covered in orchids. In each procession, one float has an image of the crucified Christ in a glass coffin; the other is of his faithful sorrowing mother. Starting at three in the afternoon, for twelve hours, accompanied by bands playing a death march and clackers reminding us of the locks on Hell’s gate, hundreds of young men carry Christ and his Mother through the streets as the hellish traffic rushes by. What impressed me most was that these ordinary young men—some of whom come to the task directly from their work—are just of the age, fifteen to twenty-five, we almost never see in church. Yet annually they faithfully perform this difficult devotion to the Crucified and his Compassionate Mother. I shall not pretend that I walked the whole twelve hours with any of the processions. Nonetheless, after beginning with two of them, at three in the morning, I was present at the end of one.

After the heavy floats with Our Lord and His Mother were carried safely back into the church from which they had set out, the young men who had borne them for twelve hours formed a great circle with the flower decked image of St Mary still on their shoulders. Out of the silence, a single piccolo sounded a sweet melody; to my great surprise, the whole ball of this mass of tough youths wrapped in a great embrace, began to sing a lullaby. As they sang, they rocked Our Holy Mother as if to return to her the comforting love they had received from their own Mamas. Then off they and I went into the dark.

A month later, on a Sunday night in Damascus, I was reminded of this. At the end of Mass, in a church so packed I had to squeeze in the door and wedge myself against the font, I

found myself in a congregation of every age and description, and each age was as much male as female. As I arrived, they were singing a hymn to the Virgin Mother in Arabic, from this they moved to a sung prayer to her. At this point the deep male voices in the throng dominated. Once again, the Holy Mother was gathering in her sons.

The last, and the most impressive, evidence of this unifying power of St Mary the Virgin was shown me at a shrine outside Damascus. The convent of Orthodox nuns at Seidnaya treasures an ancient, jewel-like, tiny painting of St Mary, so sacred that this shrine is the most holy outside Jerusalem. At present for us, even more wonderful than the miraculous power of the icon is the fact that both Moslems and Christians come here together to ask for the help of the Virgin Mother.

The Qur'an refers to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, more than the Bible does. For Islam she is a virgin mother (Qur'an 19:20) upon whom the Qur'an says "God's word was cast" (4:171). Angels come to tell her that she will bear the prophesied Messiah: "God has chosen you and purified you, exalted you above the women of all peoples" (3:42). In the Qur'an God declares: "There was the one who kept her virginity and we breathed of Our Spirit into her, and so we made her and her son a sign for all the peoples" (21:19). In consequence, while I was in Seidnaya, at least as many heavily veiled Moslem women came with gifts and prayers to Our Lady as Christians—moreover, as I was leaving, a group of Moslem men arrived. Probably the most notable Moslem male pilgrims in recent years were the Syrian cosmonauts who prayed for her protection before they circled the earth in Russia's space vehicle, the Mir. When they were safely home, they returned with gifts to thank the All-Holy Mary.

What gives this attractive draw, this power of gathering, to St Mary the Virgin, our Patron? In Isaiah, God compares his compassionate fidelity to that of a mother for the child whom she has suckled and promised that his compassion will exceed what nature inspires. God keeps his promise through Mary. The fidelity of Mary, the sinless Mother, is boundless. She is our last resort. Faithful to her condemned son at Golgatha, she pleads for every sinner; she prays for us now and in the hour of our death. She is for us the sign and the means of the endless compassion God extends to us in her son, Jesus. She reaches over boundaries of gender and religion to gather her children, his heirs, under the infinite mercy of God.

The great medieval mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich, brings us to the mothering of God by way of Jesus. In her own sufferings she remembered his desire to gather us under his care. Jesus cried: "Thou that killest the prophets, that stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but ye would not" (Matthew 23:37). Despite our murderous waywardness and betrayals, Jesus again and again willed to gather us to him. The mother of Jesus fulfills his desire. She holds over us the wings of God. Her ministry summons ours.

For each and all of us there is someone whose need only you or I, in the singularity of the here and now, can supply. Often we know already who this is, and too often "ye would not". It may be a child, your own husband or wife, a friend or a foe. It may be the neighbour you have not yet encountered on the road leading down from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30). Known and refused, or unknown, there are some for whom you or I must, as we now say, "be there"; some for whom we are called to exercise the faithful compassion of the motherhood of God, the mothering of Jesus. Often the mother's love we are called to give comes down to the assurance that with me or you there is always a welcome, a refuge, safety, a home. No matter, whatever it be, the need is one, you or I, and only you or I can supply. To the demand, Mary leads us to answer, "be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). By this response, the mothering of God became hers; by it repeated it also shall be ours. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.