

# Sermon for Mothering Sunday 2009

by *David Wilbourne, Vicar of Helmsley*

'Son, this is your mother. Mother, this is your son.'

One way of looking at today's Gospel reading is to see it as Jesus making arrangements for the inter-regnum caused by his crucifixion/ascension! In fact, many people who have congratulated me on becoming a bishop through clenched teeth having pointed out, with glee barely disguised, that becoming a bishop will mean I will probably be crucified. Well crucifixion is not on the cards because of consecration, but because of baptism: 'Unless you take up your cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.'

But whilst today's Gospel is obviously set in the Crucifixion, it is primarily about mothering, and how true mothering can spill over and be practised way outside the family context.

First I want to say a heartfelt thank you to those who have been brave enough to unfold their mothering before our churchy eyes these last twelve years. Obviously Rachel with our daughters, Ruth, Hannah and Clare. But also Erica, with Ed, William, Charles and Isobel – we've never had a confirmation which hasn't starred one of your offspring! Then Catherine with Alex and Thomas. Sharon, with Tom, Henry and William. Karen, with Jade, Tyler, Elliot and Finian. Nicky, with Thomas (not the tank engine) and Charlotte. Fiona, with Amy, Laura and Shona and to be named. Sharon with Samuel. Julia with Harry and Rose. Vicki with Martha and Noah. Lousie with Matilda. Cheryl with Imogen. Jane with Anya and Iona. Jane (II) with Alexander and Henrietta. Claire with Nick and James. Alison with Ben and Holly. And last but certainly never least, Lucy and Tabitha.

Quite a roll of honour, akin to the roll of the fallen I read out on Remembrance Day. Except that this roll is about life, glorious life, rather than death, and we have been deeply privileged to have been a part of that. Your life has brought us life and I cannot say how deeply grateful I am.

I have to confess I see myself as parish priest as a bit of a mother. Like most mothers, I somehow knew you before our relationship came to birth, before you were in the womb, to coin a phrase from the psalms. I first visited Helmsley as a child of 11 when my father bought a new harmonium for his little church at Ellerton Priory. It was a Rolls Royce of a harmonium, but we were done! The seller gave us the impression he was selling it for 'four to five pounds.' When we had got really enthusiastic about the purchase and offered the princely sum of £4 10s he changed his tune, or changed the key, 'I said £45 not four to five pounds.'

Anyway, by this time we were so hooked we bought it and our farmer churchwarden transported it the 50 miles to the vale of York on his tatie wagon. As I say, the organ was a Rolls Royce of an harmonium: there was even a choice of power for the bellows – either the organist could pedal them, or there was a lever on the side that someone else could pump. The organ had a mind of its own, and often decided to change its power source in the middle of a hymn, which meant the organist pedalled faster and faster to no avail as the tune veered into a ghastly key, and the organ emitted a final sound a cross between a dyspeptic cow and a very unpromising Scot having his first bagpipe lesson. It made 11 year old me giggle. Hitherto I had not found church a laughing matter, but I've never stopped laughing since. Thank you Helmsley for exporting laughter in church. I am privileged to have brought it home!

In the nineteen nineties I viewed you from afar, from Bishopthorpe, and felt the anguish of a mother watching her child being terribly bullied, bullied and treated shamefully by people on the ground, but also bullied by the system. You were not suffering alone: Bishop Gordon Bates and Chris Hawthorn were absolutely marvellous advocates and I felt so desperately sorry for you, and even tweaked the Senior Staff agenda whenever I could!

Every mother of a bullied child snaps at some stage, steams up to the school gates and sorts the bullies out. I saw my coming here in that light. My grieving three year old of a father was cruelly bullied by his stepmother; I don't know whether this is something genetic, but whenever I come across a bully I really do go nuclear. But every mother of a bullied child knows deep in her heart that she has to address something in the child

which makes it prone to be bullied, prone to be a victim.  
And that addressing is a painful and a slow process,  
moving from victim to wholeness and confidence as God's glorious child.  
That has been my agenda: restoring the glory that you so richly deserve.

Mothering is a two-way process.

At some stage we end up mothering our mother.

You have mothered me and my family in wonderful ways.

Enid, my first churchwarden

has been like a mother to us throughout our 12 years.

Alan, also my first churchwarden

and Joan have treated me like their son.

I am sorry that Alan is not here to see this day, but he did see it coming,

in that in officially welcoming me as vicar at my induction he piped up,

'David, we welcome you as our... ..bishop!'

Soon after coming here,

I stupidly didn't leave myself enough time to cycle to a service at pretty East Moors,  
so pedalled faster than I should have.

It was raining so I wore my waterproofs to cycle through the clouds.

With the result that I was overheating big time.

I got there, launched into the service

but by the time I got to the creed, my body crashed.

I came round with Mary – Stewart not The Virgin –

mopping my brow and soothing me.

I thought at the time here is a mother worthy of the name Mary.

Just a few examples of all the mothering you have done for us,  
for which we are immensely grateful.

I think too of the local doctors, particularly Dr Mike Titchmarsh,

and the local schools, Helmsley school and Ryedale School,

whose mothering is massive and costly,

and I put on record our immense gratitude for them.

In my roll of honour of mothers I left out one person

whom I salute from the depth of my heart.

That person is Marguerite Weyer,

who unfolded before us how to mother to the very end

and beyond, most gloriously beyond.

Every person enfolds you and Linda and Martin

with their love and sheer admiration.

Unlike the rabbi of a very venerable couple both aged 99.

They came to him requesting a divorce.

'Divorce, divorce, but you've been married 79 years, you're both nearly a hundred.

Why on earth do you want to divorce now?'

'Well,' the nonagenarian husband replied,

'We thought we'd wait until the children had all... ..died!'

Of course, all children die.

They leave childhood behind and become teenagers and adults.

Things never last for ever, just a season, and we should marvel over the season.

'Thanks be to God for this brief possession, so full of joy,'

the poet, Alan Paton, laments as his son grows into a man.

C D Lewis celebrates losing and leaving in one of my favourite poems

about a father watching his son play his first football game:

*It's eighteen years ago, almost to the day -*

*A sunny day with the leaves just turning,*

*The touch-lines new-ruled - since I watched you play*

*Your first game of football, then, like a satellite*

*Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away*

*Behind a scatter of boys. I can see*

*You walking away from me towards the school*

*With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free*

*Into a wilderness, the gait of one*

*Who finds no path where **the** path should be.*

*That hesitant figure, eddying away*

*Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,*

*Has something I never quite grasp to convey*

*About nature's give-and-take - the small, the scorching*

*Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.*

*I have had worse partings, but none that so*

*Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly*

*Saying what God alone could perfectly show -*

*How selfhood begins with a walking away,*

*And love is proved in the letting go.*

Love is proved in the letting go, every mother's love is proved in the letting go.

'Do not cling to me,' the risen Jesus says to Mary Magdalene on the first Easter Day.

We have to let the people we love go, or we smother them.

And that's it, really, a dozen years in a dozen minutes.

To those whom I have offended,

to those who have found me a bit much,

to those of you I have neglected - and that is the majority! –

I humbly offer my sincere and heartfelt apologies.

And ask for the greatest gift a child can give to a mother,

a mother can give to a child: the gift of forgiveness.

'Father, forgive them,' Luke's Jesus says from the cross.

To pray that we may forgive and be forgiven

has Christ's precedent and is our duty and our joy

But the very last word has to go to that great Father of the Church, Elvis Presley,  
who speaks for every mother: 'You were always on my mind.'

And always will be. Amen