

20200322 Mothering Sunday

Today we meet as the Bishop of Norwich says, as the people of God, as Church, but in a new way. We are still gathered, but sadly not as we are used to and yet as we shall see, still being effective as people of the Kingdom.

In his book "The Stature of Waiting", which I will confess to being somewhat a fan of, W H Vanstone contrasts the language used of Jesus before and after his arrest, his being 'handed-over', in the garden of Gethsemane. Should we concentrate on Mark's Gospel, we note that the language concerning Jesus and his actions is always full of vigour and purpose: he moves as does the text of the Gospel, from place to place and he, as Vanstone remarks, "leaves behind him a trail of transformed scenes and changed situations" and his presence is "active and instantly transforming". Jesus above all *does things* and the language of the text in its use of verbs reflects this *doing* as Jesus is shown, as so many of us know him today to be, as the doer of good towards those he encounters, whether singly or towards crowds of thousands. It is the

portrayal of action in the Gospel which in turns causes us, and calls us, to respond; the scriptures are 'living and active' in the way they call us to react and respond to God's work in the world, to the witness of His forever love, embedded in Creation.

All this changes when in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus is arrested. Now quite suddenly, he is 'handed over' and the language also hands the action over to others, to do *to* Jesus rather than Jesus *doing* to others; the place of Jesus changes radically from being the instigator, the active agent, to becoming the passive recipient. The Jesus who up to now with every word and phrase in Mark's Gospel, "carries (each) episode forward and sustains its momentum", changes. There are places earlier in the Gospel of Mark where in short passages there is a veritable blizzard of active verbs describing Christ's actions, and now all that falls silent; instead of action he is being acted upon; he is waiting.

I well remember on one of my first visits to a prison I was struck with some degree of fear, because as I was entering the complex I was required to enter something

akin to a secure room. There was one door in and one out and both were not only locked, they had slid into place with no lock or handle visible on their surface. In addition there was no way of speaking to anyone outside this secure box and no indication when I might be allowed out, to continue my journey into the prison. I was completely in the control of another and had simply to wait until someone decided to remember that I was there. I was on my own and had to contain an urge to panic. Control of my life had passed to something other than myself; I was waiting.

I wonder if there is something of a similar feeling now as we enter what may turn out to be a prolonged period of isolation, perhaps on our own and certainly with few others. Control of our lives has been ceded to something else. All that we used to do is now changing; we are no longer active participants in life.

Let's now consider our celebration today of Mothering Sunday. Yes of course I recognise that for some Mothering Sunday brings with it pain rather than grateful joy and I see that even one of our major supermarkets was sensitive

enough in its advertising recently to recognise this, and yet I suspect that our scriptures today have something to say even about that. In celebrating this aspect of our own care, we are celebrating things done to us, in that we were *mothered to*, and Christ himself had that same experience in being *mothered to* by his own mother Mary.

Yet we too in a less positive manner, are now having things done to us, rather than being our usual active selves in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

For those who we remember particularly today, those for whom today is a day of pain, let's draw upon our Gospel reading. So often Jesus turns our apparent norms upside down; we remember for example how he transforms our understanding of kingship into one of service not one of being served, something of course our own monarch is an extraordinary example of. Now Jesus transforms our understanding of *mothering* because at the point in her own life when his mother Mary was no longer so able to care for herself, he places her in a new family, that of his disciple John. Jesus teaches us that it is not only our

own mothers who might *mother* us, but indeed sends others to love and nurture us, perhaps friends, perhaps acquaintances, perhaps someone else's mother. Mothering no longer is something necessarily tied to a biological bond (although for many happily it is just that), but something tied to a willingness to love and nurture and care for, another.

Returning now to Jesus after his arrest: yes he is no longer the active agent, but is it not true that as he enters apparently a time of inactivity, this is as we all know, the time when he became his most *effective*? Jesus in his passivity, in his apparent inactivity, through his death and resurrection, is become the Saviour of the World, and draws all those who call upon him into a relationship with himself. Is it not extraordinary that at the very point of his inaction, Jesus is paradoxically his most active in the lives of all humanity?

We too should perhaps draw huge comfort from this. Christ as he approaches the terror of his passion, transforms what is a hopeless situation into one that is the eternal hope of all of us: we really no longer have to

fear the future; what it may be, we are never too sure except that it will be good and glorious, of that we can now be certain. It was said of Christ that he endured the shame of the Cross because of the hope set before him. We too can do the self-same thing and not because we ourselves are super-able, but because Christ went through death for us and came out alive. We too now, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, we too now have this hope. We have this hope precisely at the point of frailty, precisely at the point of our inactivity, precisely when we are perhaps feeling quite out of control of our lives.

The promise of our texts today is that we are indeed to be *effective*. I wonder how we can be effective whilst perhaps self-isolating and certainly whilst not being as active as we might usually be? Are there ways we can still be in contact with each other? Might not a phone call to someone also in our position, be an encouragement to them? Might we take this opportunity to be more active in prayer? Might we be able to join with others in prayer perhaps through some form of technology or even by radio?

And so difficult though this period undoubtably is,
we persist in hope knowing that all will be well; we know
that we can be effective in encouraging one another, we
know we can be effective in prayer, deepening our
relationship with Christ; we know we are still here for
those Christ sends us to be with.

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