

MOTHERING SUNDAY
AND BAPTISM OF ALYSSA GRACE WEAVER
“THIS IS GOING TO HURT”

“This is going to hurt”. Not words people would normally expect to hear when preparing for the arrival of a baby, but every mother knows that the bringing of a new life into the world will not be pain-free. And those who have watched the BBC drama by the same name – This is Going to Hurt - about the Gynaecological and obstetrics ward in a London hospital will have seen the humour, poignancy, shock but also the tragedy of what the NHS has been going through, based on the book by a former doctor based on some of his experiences in the NHS.

I hope very much that the arrival of Alyssa into the world did not come with some of the trauma that some experienced in that series. But on this Mothering Sunday – which is not the same as the American Mother’s Day – we give thanks for, and explore the theme of mothering, as the original basis for Mothering Sunday was not mother’s but for those working in the service of landed gentry to return to their mother church for a weekend, which happened to include visiting one’s mother, but that wasn’t the main focus. But the theme is mothering. And it is appropriate as we give thanks for the birth of Alyssa, and welcome her into the family of the church, to think about what a child needs if she is to grow up in safety and to her full potential.

When Mary gave birth to Jesus, she had heard the message of the angel Gabriel to her, but then she and Joseph had to become refugees in Egypt, away from the cruel tyrant Herod, who wanted to kill this baby. As we watch the tragedy of Ukraine unfolding we probably think we are so grateful that we are not like some parents who have had to flee with

babies, but we rightly want to do all we can to help those refugees find a place of safety and welcome elsewhere in Europe and UK. We all recognise how parenthood can so easily hurt, not just the act of giving birth, but all the pain when ones hopes and fears one has for one's child are not always fulfilled.

And this is where the words of Simeon in our gospel reading are honest and realistic, but also with a message of hope. Let's look at that gospel more closely. Let's remember Mary and Joseph have entered the Temple to dedicate Jesus their son as was the custom, and he is approached by the aging Simeon, who takes the baby in his arms and then declares the poem of praise that we know as the Nunc Dimittis, as he has seen the Messiah, which God had promised would happen before he died.

Mary and Joseph are amazed at what is being said about Jesus, that he is God's salvation, and would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel.

Every parent has great hopes for their children when they are born – to make their mark in some way, to add something to the lives of others, and probably our greatest hope is that they are happy and healthy! I'm sure Philip and Louise have such hopes for Alyssa, just as they do for Imogen! And your parents did for each one of you, however many decades ago that might have been! But Simeon says some unique things about Jesus.

First Jesus is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel. What does that mean? Jesus would divide people; those who would believe in him and those who would not. And think even in the Gospel story of those who encountered Jesus during his life. There were the authority figures, like Pontius Pilate, who had great power, and who followed the

baying crowd when Jesus was brought to trial, and had him crucified, but then has been a footnote of history, whereas there were blind people like Bartimaeus, who were healed, and whose names have been remembered through history for being healed by Jesus; there are the religious leaders like Caiaphas and Annas, and members of the Sanhedrin who paid Judas to betray Jesus, but then there are the hidden disciples like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who come to Jesus by night, or who offer their own grave for Jesus to be buried in, and who are remembered as examples of faith. Or the women around Jesus, like Mary Magdalene who were lifted from a despised position into being the witnesses of the resurrection, and apostle to the apostles. **The falling and rising of many.** It is not about worldly power that is important, but how far we let Jesus be the centre of our lives, and seek to find our purpose and hope, our peace and our identity in him. And in baptism we are identified with Christ. We have to live out that baptism, and become disciples followers of Jesus, but for the whole of my life, now, I have not come across a leader who is more worthy of being followed; yes there are some great individuals in human history and contemporary society, but it is Jesus who shows what it means to live as a human, in compassion for others, in confronting lies, and revealing the truth, and who above all is the only person who has ever died and been raised to life, showing us that this life is not the end.

And Jesus would be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed; again think of the greed of Judas for thirty pieces of silver, or the self-preservation of Peter, who denied knowing Jesus three times to avoid getting in trouble, but was restored when he admitted he loved Jesus after the resurrection, or think again of the vanity of Pontius Pilate, who was concerned about whether a bad report about him would get back to Rome, and risk his career, and so he gave way to the crowd on that first Palm Sunday who were shouting

“crucify him!” about Jesus, even though he thought Jesus was innocent. You can go through the last week of Jesus life up to his death and see how the thoughts of people around him were exposed through their actions. But that wasn’t the end of the story. Because Simeon also says to Mary, “and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” This is going to hurt. Life hurts. Every parent experiences the pain of parenting; their hopes for their children not always being as smooth as they would like. But of course Mary was the one who would watch her son die on a Roman cross. No one should have to experience that.

So what message of encouragement is there in this passage for a day which is normally marked by flowers, and cards, joy and gladness and gratitude for our mothers? In the midst of the message that Simeon gives to Joseph and Mary it says “he blessed them”. In the Bible a blessing brings about what it promises. Here we see the Bible and the story of Jesus is nothing if not realistic about the pain and suffering of life, but mixed with the blessings. Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph. And when we receive a blessing, just as Alyssa has today, and all of us will at the end, it doesn’t mean we go through life without facing hardship, suffering, and pain, but it is a blessing that enables us to survive, to persevere. Just think what an amazing son Jesus must have been for Mary. Even aged 33 as she sees him die on a cross she would have had so many things to thank God for. And of course we know that three days later her son was raised to life, conquering death, not just for himself, but for all of us. Death was defeated.

The Bible doesn’t sugar coat the Christian faith; it is real; there is suffering, but also there are joys unspeakable, blessings – of children, of God’s goodness, of the privileges of being part of the family of God, in the midst of darkness. Mary was a mother who stored up things in her heart, and what a story she had to share, long after the resurrection and

the ascension of her son. We too are those who receive a blessing. Sometimes we have to hold on to it when we are going through dark times, and wait until we see more of God's blessings, but in the midst of darkness it is important to find things to give thanks to God for. Paul, in our New Testament reading from Colossians, said, "**Be thankful.**" I am sure that Philip and Louise and Imogen and their family are thankful today for Alyssa – and who wouldn't be! But Paul goes on...."**And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**"

Today ***we give thanks*** for our mothers, for the Mother Church which has nurtured us in faith, and helped us become steadfast in faith; for Alyssa, whom we are about to welcome into the family of God by baptism, and we give thanks above all for Jesus, who followed his calling to be the Saviour of the world, our Saviour, even though it would hurt him, dying on the cross for our sins; and we recommit ourselves to doing everything we do in His name, to bring honour to Him, until one day we see him face to face. To God be the glory, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen!