

Here is your mother!

It's possibly one of the most poignant and most tender stories in the New Testament. Ironically, though, it happens during the horror of the crucifixion. When Jesus sees his mother Mary, and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he says to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' And to John, 'Here is your mother.' (John 19:25-27.)

In many Christian traditions, Mary is given much prominence. Whatever our feelings about this, we cannot deny that she was given an important role in the story of Jesus. As a young girl she is the one who is astounded by the angel's visit; she carries the shame of becoming pregnant outside of marriage as she carries him in her womb, and she suffers the agony of having to watch him suffer and die on the cross many years later. Her soul was indeed pierced, as Simeon prophesied (Luke 2:35).

As we see in Mary's story, motherhood can be a painful experience. Today, however, the pain of motherhood can be so much worse for the world's poorest. While maternal health has improved tremendously for so many in the developed world, this is not the case for those in developing countries. It is why the international community made the improvement of maternal health one of the key outcomes of the Millennium Development Goals, set in 2000.

The aim was that no more than 150 mothers died per 100,000 live childbirths. Progress has been slow; according to the World Bank it is this goal that has seen least progress. But progress has been made – between 1990 and 2013 the number of deaths reduced by 45%.

Ghana itself has seen a dramatic reduction: from 760 deaths to 380 between those same years; heartening news indeed, for behind each statistic there lies a family in much pain at the loss of a mother. Before we congratulate ourselves, however, let us remember that in Wales the number is eight!

Let's return to the foot of the cross. 'Woman, here is your son.' And to John, 'Here is your mother.' What could we draw from this story that would inspire us today to put our best possible effort to this year's appeal?

First, we note that Jesus honours his mother in this incident.

According to his Gospel, honouring his mother is something that John has noticed Jesus do twice. Indeed, in the whole of his Gospel narrative, John has only two substantive references to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Oddly, she is not named by him at all – she is just referred to as 'the mother of Jesus'.

The first incident occurs very early on in the Gospel, in a wedding in Cana, Galilee. The story is familiar and the symbolism that it contains is significant. But it is sufficient for us today to notice that, despite the fact that his 'hour had not yet come' (John 2:4), Jesus still honours his mother's request and turns the water into wine. The second is the incident we are focussing on today. At the foot of the cross, in extreme physical agony, Jesus honours his mother and ensures she has someone to care for her.

One of the key theological truths in the Johannine writings in the New Testament is the emphasis on the human and divine nature of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This reflects a debate that was ongoing on the margins of early church life – and which some suggested threatened the core message of the Gospel itself: was Jesus truly human? According to Greek philosophy, flesh and matter are impure and unholy, and God would never have come in human form. In this viewpoint, Jesus only appeared human. John was adamant, however, that this was not the case. Jesus came as a man; he dwelt among us; he was the Word made flesh.

In becoming human in Christ, God honours our very humanity. We too are a part of God's good creation – however marred by the fall. In this incident at the foot of the cross, however, John portrays Jesus as taking this honouring of humanity a step further – he honours women and in particular, honours mothers.

In the first century Mediterranean world, life was cheap. The common man, and especially the common woman, was utterly dispensable.

It was very much a hierarchical society and women found themselves very low down the ladder. Today, in many parts of the world, we might ask what has changed. Inequality is a deep scar upon our world, and gender inequality in particular. When it comes to maternal health, it isn't just a lack of health care investment that needs to be overcome, but the attitude of treating women as second class citizens. This is why gender equality lies at the heart of so much of what Christian Aid is doing. Lifting women means lifting the poor. And it begins by giving them – and all humanity – a place of honour as a part of God's good creation.

Secondly, this honouring has practical consequences.

Seeing the other as an equal – be they of a different gender, or race, or religion – is crucial. But if this honouring does not then translate to practical, real life consequences, then the honour counts for very little.

The consequence for Mary is that she is taken into John's home. She is given a place within his household. The household was a key part of community life in this period. At a time when there was no state help offered to those struggling in life, it was only within the household you could be sure of security and shelter. Without it you could end up in serious trouble – living as a beggar on the streets, with probably a much shortened life.

In providing a home and a family for Mary we see that she is offered practical help that will change her life. This is not just about giving her a short-term handout, however. The consequences for Mary are long-term.

In the whole debate about how best to eradicate world poverty we hear a lot about the need for structural change – in governance, in economics, in gender equality. It is not enough to keep on giving short-term handouts on an as needed basis – however necessary that may be at times. If real progress is to be made on poverty, deep structural change is needed.

Mary is surely a beneficiary of a longer term solution to her plight as a widow. She is given a son to care for her; she is taken into his home; she becomes a member of his family. For her this meant structural change.

Consider too what this meant for John. He now had another mouth to feed, another person to care for. It meant real change for his life too. If poverty is to be defeated through structural change, can we go on consuming? Can we go on becoming richer and richer while others in our world become poorer? Can we carry on living our lifestyle? Or must we too face change in our lives?

Honouring the humanity in others should lead to practical consequences – for them and for us.

Thirdly, the practical consequences that leads from honour, can lead to mutual benefit.

We've already noticed how the practical consequences can mean a change in lifestyle for those who have to implement structural change. John had a new family member to care for. He had added responsibilities. But we shouldn't necessarily think of this in terms of a negative imposition. It isn't necessarily a one-way street.

When Jesus said to Mary, 'This is your son', he also said to John, 'This is your mother!' If Mary receives the security of a household to live with, John receives a significant relationship. He has a mother once again. While there are costs involved for John, there are also great benefits. Indeed, who can tell who received the greatest benefit that day?!

This mutual benefit reflects a profound biblical truth: by reaching out to the poor and the oppressed, we gain. In that reaching out we are reminded by Jesus that it is not just the poor and oppressed we are reaching out to, but to Jesus himself. In the parable about the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46) Jesus makes it very clear who his followers meet when they see the hungry, sick, or the imprisoned – they meet with him. There is mutual benefit here. We might even say that in encountering Jesus, the giver has actually received far more than he has given.

In our giving, in our aid, in our reaching out to mothers in Ghana, we must be careful that we do not adopt a paternalistic and patronising attitude. Such attitudes would be so wrong. One way of guarding against it is in remembering how much we receive when we give.

Through this appeal, therefore, we have an opportunity. An opportunity to make a real difference to many thousands of mothers in northern Ghana. But in reaching out to them, we are also reaching out to Christ, deepening our own spiritual life while bringing physical life to others.

Amen.

Suggested readings:

John 19:25-27

Matthew 25:31-46

Psalms 8.