

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Motherhood and Apple Crumble

For Americans, motherhood and apple pie are things that are so simply and incontrovertibly good that can be no controversy on either subject and so there is nothing to talk about. But this is a mistake. In fact it is the very mistake that Mothering Sunday is intended to rectify: the mistake of taking motherhood for granted.

It is inevitable, perhaps, we do this. To put it bluntly and biologically – ‘no mother, no you’. But motherhood isn't only about giving birth or providing the first nutrition that a baby needs; it's about the wider package of nurture, care and love that allows human beings to grow, develop and come to fulfilment. In many happy cases these further qualities are provided by the birth mother; but it doesn't always work out like that. Some people do better for being brought up by someone else and over the years a bond is formed that is as deep as durable as any biological connection, while others continue to feel deprivation or rejection for the rest of their lives.

Motherhood, then, isn't quite so simple. But then neither is apple pie. Apple pie can take various forms, and different cooks favour different recipes; and one might debate whether or not a crumble is a kind of pie and, if not, whether crumble is better than pie. As it happens this is the position I take, especially if blackberries are added to the apple, and a few ground nuts and oats to the crumble.

Apple pie then *can* be improved upon. But what about motherhood in general? And what about the motherhood that we have experienced or offered ourselves?

We probably won't want to judge the details, but content ourselves with saying that motherhood is about loving and that the main thing is that a mother loves her child.

And yet loving - while the thing we are all most commanded to do, and the quality that we most readily attribute to both God and mothers, is not always easy or straightforward. Once you start to think about it mothering becomes quite complicated. For one thing there are so many decisions to be made.

How democratic should domestic decision making be? To what extent should the desires of children be indulged, and to what extent should they be curbed or shaped? How does a loving parent deal with untruthfulness in a child, or the development of anti-social habits? There are a million and more issues that parents need to agonise about if they want not only to be emotionally loving but wisely loving to their children. (How protective? How encouraging? How realistic? How censorious? How directive?)

These questions of parenting have never been more hotly contended or indeed researched. A visiting fellow here last year, Alison Gopnik, is a major authority in this area. In her book, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, she uses these two different practices as metaphors for parenting. In the one case you have a piece of wood that you fashion into what you want it to be by direct effort on the material; in the other you have something organic, alive and growing that it's your job to tend and care and bring to flourishing in the way that owes much to your interventions but is always going to be way beyond your power to control and which may well end up delighting you with surprises. Gopnik's argument is that parents these days tend to think of their task as carpentry, when it would be better for all concerned if they thought of themselves as gardeners. Why? Because you can't and you shouldn't try to create a certain kind of adult out of your child; rather you should do what you can to allow your child to flourish in ways beyond both your imaging and your control.

I have a lot of respect and sympathy for Gopnik's angle on this, and am especially intrigued by her examples, partly because they are so biblical. Adam, the father of all, was a gardener, Joseph, Jesus' step-father, was a carpenter, and after his resurrection Jesus was himself mistaken for a gardener.

Also intriguing is that the idea of the gardener is intricately caught up in Julian of Norwich's theological imagery. In her pivotal story of 'the Lord and the Servant' she sees the servant as a both Adam and Christ, and imagines him as a gardener.

Julian, who lived in the fourteenth century and was the first woman to write a book in English, also spoke of God as both our father *and* our mother

In our making God almighty is our loving father by nature; and God all wisdom is our loving mother by nature, together with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit. (Julian, *Revelations*, Chapter 58)

But Julian particularly identifies the motherhood of God with the second person of the Trinity - Jesus Christ.

So Jesus Christ who does good in return for evil is our true mother; we have our being from him where the ground of motherhood begins, with all the precious safekeeping of love which endlessly follows. (Julian, *Revelations*, Chapter 59)

If you are looking for something defining and divine in motherhood it might be in this little phrase: 'doing good in return for evil', for among the many qualities of a good mother is the capacity to deal well with a child who has done badly or wrong - whether by neglect or with deliberation and malice.

The commercial world has turned what used to be called 'Mothering Sunday' into 'Mother's Day'. You can see why it would. There is a huge market in gifts and cards for 'mum'. But the reality is that while we need and value and love our mother, motherhood is not a role that is always vested in one particular individual. The truth of the matter is that we need many people to be, as it were, mothers for us; supporting us when we are vulnerable, being generous and forgiving with us when we don't deserve it, and showing us that aspect of God which the Bible calls 'loving-kindness'.

All this is true, but Mother Julian wants us to go further than this in our theology, that is, in our understanding of how this all connects to God.

As truly as God is our father, so truly is God our mother; and he revealed that in everything, and especially in those sweet words where he says: 'It is I', that is to say: 'It is I: the power and the goodness of fatherhood. It is I: the wisdom and the kindness of motherhood. It is I: the light and the grace which is all blessed love. It is I: the Trinity. It is I: the unity. I am the supreme goodness of all manner of things. It is I who makes

you to love. It is I who makes you to long. It is I: the endless fulfilment of all true desires. (Julian, *Revelations*, Chapter 59)

Understood richly, motherhood points to the living-kindness of God which seeks the fulfilment and flourishing of each and every one of God's children. This is the insight which Julian had so vividly in the fourteenth century and which patriarchal, disciplinary and punitive theology has so often forgotten. And this is why it is right on this day to thank God for the love that has formed us over the years, to renew our commitment to offering nurturing love to others and to meditate on Julian's revelation that 'just as truly as God is our father, so truly is God our mother'.

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