

King's College London Chapel



A sermon on the theme of God as Mother,
by Alli McKelvey
in the College Chapel on the Strand,
on Wednesday 19th October 2022

May I speak in the name of God, who is Mother, Redeemer and Creator. Amen

When thinking about the names we associate with God there is almost endless variety, and we have and will have heard a few of these throughout our sermon series this term. Friend, artist, mourner, judge, all of these convey something of the person of God and some will resonate more with us than others.

However, I think that none of these names are perhaps as personal as Father and Mother. The simple fact is that everyone has parents and our relationship with them, whether we like it or not, is arguably one of the most influential relationships in our entire lives. From when we first enter the world, our life is shaped by our parents. There are even studies that show that those who have a good and healthy relationship with their parents do better at school, and conversely those that have a strained relationship are less likely to go to university.

But why is this relevant to our relationship with God? We often speak and hear about God as Father, perhaps conjuring up images of Him as an old white man with an even whiter long beard in the sky? But what if we stopped to think about God as Her, as Mother? What if we thought about God as something bigger, as someone who transcends gender and the traditional narratives that have been told to us?

In the passage from Isaiah that we read earlier, the exiles of Israel are addressed as they return to Jerusalem following its rebuilding of the destroyed temple. These are people who have known heartbreak and hardship. In this passage, God has been as a Mother in Labour, delivering her people and now God will comfort Israel as a Mother comforts Her child, fulfilling this nurturing, compassionate role that God's people have been crying out for.

There is wonderful feminine imagery of God here that is extremely tender. We have God depicted as a nursing Mother, carrying and feeding Her children. God is willing to feed Her people from Her own breast, to nourish Her people with Her own body. God will cradle us in Her arms and provide that comfort that we all so desperately want.

It is important that we do not overlook the importance of the imagery of God as a Mother in Labour too. In Biblical times, childbirth was a dangerous business and all too often a deadly one. A woman in pain in childbirth is both a vulnerable and a powerful scene. God the Mother is bringing forth new life and is willing to enter into our pain, to suffer alongside us. Our God is one of vulnerability but also one of power. God the Mother is brought into the messiness and bloody reality that is human creation and She takes joy in it. Yes, there may be pain now but soon deliverance will come as rejoicing springs forth.

Julian of Norwich, the great 14th century mystic was also a great proponent of the use of feminine language to describe the divine. When she lay dying at only 30 years old, a priest arrived to give her the last rites only for her to receive a series of visions of Jesus and miraculously recover from her illness. These visions went on the form the basis of her book, Revelations of Divine Love, the first book in English known to have been authored by a woman. In this Julian gives us this beautiful comparison of God to Mother, writing that “*when a child is hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and God wants us to do the same, like a humble child, saying, ‘My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me’*”.

However, how do we square this reading of God the Mother with our own experiences of our parents? Perhaps we’re lucky to have close relationships with our parents or maybe things are difficult? As we read these accounts of the feminine aspects of God in Isaiah, we must make space for those of us who may find these readings painful. Mother is a loaded term for so many people. Referencing an ideal Mother or Parent who will never abandon Her children does very little to practically help the pain of those who have undergone trauma through parental separation, abuse, or other pains.

I suggest that we look to these texts and metaphors as a way to acknowledge the pain and rebuild the relationship between God and Her beloved children. I believe in a God that grieves over every single abandoned child and relentlessly pursues each and every one of us. Here, I am not necessarily speaking of only being physically abandoned by your parents, although that is of course a horrifying situation, but also those abandonments, disappointments and feelings of loneliness that we all experience throughout life.

When we are younger, we often idolise our parents and parental figures. They can do no wrong, until they do. We grow up and realise our parents aren’t superheroes, they mess up and so do we, and sadly this is a pattern that follows us throughout our life. Part of entering into relationships, friendships and generally being part of the world gives people the power to harm you or to let you down. And if this makes you want to hole yourself up alone in a bunker then I’m quite in sympathy with you!

But God our Mother through Jesus Christ offers us something different, a relationship beyond the temporary to put our hope in.

“For God so loved the world that She gave Her only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”

For God so loved the world that She gave Her only Son. For God so loved the world. In God we can be embraced with a tenderness that is unbounded, protected like a hen gathers her chicks under her wing. And through the gift of the Eucharist, God invites us even closer into Her fold by offering to us an encounter with Her Son through His body and blood. It is a relationship of delight, of pure unconditional love and gentleness.

We spend so much of our lives putting on a mask, especially in our interactions with others but when we come before God our Mother, know that there is no pretence that we have to put on. No mask or brave face is ever necessary in front of Her. And when we are finally able to drop our guard there is a freedom like no other in knowing that we are totally known and held in her arms in childlike contentment, for She will always rejoice in us.

In the name of the Mother, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**