

Evensong meditation 15.8.10 BY JANE YEOMANS

The feast of the Blessed Virgin

O God, open our hearts to your word, a word that passes swiftly from the ear to the heart, from the heart to the life. Amen.

Stan and Hilda Ogden were two long standing characters in Coronation Street. Their marriage was a perpetual battleground and neither of them would have won a beauty contest. You knew it was a special occasion when Hilda removed her hair rollers. On one such occasion, one very memorable moment in my favourite TV programme, Hilda has removed said rollers and they are both scrubbed up ready for an evening out. Stan sniffs the air and with a puzzled expression asks Hilda 'what's that smell?' Hilda's reply, with a gleam in her eye, is: 'it's woman, Stanley.' Suddenly we have a very unexpected and different view of Hilda. Not the pub cleaner in her rollers, but a woman with feelings and desires.

And so we have the unexpected and different in tonight's Old Testament reading, a poem about sex. I say unexpected because there's probably a part of us that might feel slightly uncomfortable about the inclusion of such material in a sacred book. God is love, but not that kind of love surely?

The other bit of cognitive dissonance is that this reading is one of those appointed for the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I'd like to suggest that this mix of the feast day and the reading from an erotic poem brings to the surface a few challenges to our view of Mary and of God. So I will talk briefly about the unexpected and different.

One of the titles given to the Virgin Mary is 'Theotokos' which means 'God bearer'. Every time we say the creed at a service we say 'born of the Virgin Mary', or words to that effect. So motherhood is one of the ways that Mary is defined. But we can take more than that from this image. We address God as 'our Father' but does it always have to be like this? Maternal love is something that we can attribute to God as well as the paternal role. Julian of Norwich, a female mystic who lived in the Middle Ages, described Jesus as our 'true mother'. Here's a quote from one of her revelations: 'the human mother can put her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesus can lead us intimately into his blessed breast through the sweet open wound in his side, and there gives us a glimpse of the Godhead and the joy of heaven, with the inner certainty of bliss.' Here I see a link to the Song of Songs, because there is

quite a sexual undertone in this way of describing Jesus as a mother. The intensity of the relationship between the lovers in the Song of Songs is mirrored in this view of Jesus. The image of breast feeding gives us a sense of intimacy. The powerful, self absorbed and unconditional love described in the Song of Songs might also describe maternal love.

Turning specifically to Mary, the God bearer, the mother of God, then why would she not have experienced the many different expressions of human love that we have thought about briefly? As a wife and mother she would have experienced the two most powerful forms of love. So I would suggest that the image of a meek and mild Mary is not in fact one that rings true. I think it's tempting to relegate her to the role of the submissive woman because we only really have tantalising glimpses of her in the New Testament. But we must not forget her importance, especially if we look at John's narrative of the crucifixion. It's in his account that Jesus makes sure that his mother is cared for by the disciple whom he loved.

Mary's experience of motherhood was not conventional. Luke's Gospel contains the account of the Annunciation and here we have much to learn from Mary. She receives the news from Gabriel then asks for some clarification about the origin of this pregnancy because she is a virgin. Having been informed that it will be the work of the Holy Spirit, her response is: 'may it be to me as you have said', sometimes summed up by the Latin word *fiat*, which translated means 'let it be done'. However, Mary's response is not one of a downtrodden woman simply agreeing to something she has been told. Mary is an active participant and her statement is a resounding 'Amen' of agreement to do God's will. A document setting out agreement between Anglicans and Roman Catholics concerning beliefs about Mary sums up her assent thus: 'this *fiat* of Mary was distinctive, in its openness to God's Word, and in the path to the foot of the cross and beyond on which the Spirit led her.....Mary's 'Amen' to God's 'Yes' in Christ to her is thus both unique and a model for every disciple and for the life of the Church.' And here I'll make a brief link to the reading from Acts, where Mary the mother of Jesus is present with the disciples after Jesus' ascension. She is there at the key moments of Jesus' ministry and at the very beginnings of the church that developed when Jesus' earthly ministry was finished.

So, to sum up, what can we take from the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary? Firstly, we are challenged about our love and devotion for God and in our view of God. Imagery of human love from the Song of Songs and in

our view of Mary as a mother challenge us to think about how we love God and how we view that love. Is our love as fierce and intense as that of two lovers or of a mother for her child? Maybe maternal or sexual love are fitting metaphors that help us to understand how God loves us and how we might love God. I don't think St Paul was given to erotic imagery, but he does say in his letter to the Ephesians that we need to grasp how wide, long and high and deep is God's love and that it surpasses all knowledge. Therefore, we can't put boundaries on God's love and as such we risk limiting our understanding if we are coy about the metaphors that we use.

Secondly, Mary just got on with it. It is striking that many male giants of the Old Testament such as Moses, Jeremiah or Jonah all argued with God about their calling and then having reluctantly accepted proceed to make a mess of things. Mary's response to being told that she was a virgin but pregnant with the son of God, is to say 'yes, OK'. No tears, hysterics or protests. So the challenge for us is how far our discipleship matches up to this example. How much time and energy do we put into avoiding God's call? Mary simply says 'let it be done'. These aren't the words of someone who has been beaten into submission, but of a strong and confident woman who has absolute trust in God.

Thirdly, we see someone who doesn't take centre stage in the New Testament narratives. Despite this, if we look hard, we see her presence at all of the key moments. How far do we follow our path of discipleship without fuss? We're reminded of the words of Jesus: 'the last shall be first.'

The New Testament does not record very many of Mary's actual words. We have already heard some of them in her response to the angel Gabriel. I'd like to leave you with Mary's words at the Cana wedding. She said to the servants: 'do whatever he tells you.' Amen.