

SERMON FOR MOTHERS UNION

SUNDAY 9.8.20

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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Now tell me if you have heard me say this one before. One day a protestant theologian died and he appeared before Jesus at the entrance to the pearly gates. As was proper when going into heaven it was time for introductions: “Ah, professor, said Jesus, I know you have met my father, but I don’t believe you know my mother”.

Today is the day allocated to celebrating the ministry of Mary Sumner, the founder of the Mother’s Union. This coming Saturday is the

Feast of St Mary. St Mary is a significant feast in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, though because of its Marian flavour it is not well recognised in the protestant church. This lack of recognition has something to do with the protestant church’s rather uneasiness with the figure of Mary over the centuries. This uneasiness was something the reformers felt at a time when the church had become focused on such things as indulgences for sin, lavishness and laxity.

Unfortunately Mary was one of the victims of the reformers rage. Out of the pure motive of wanting to strip away any hindrances to God, they say reverence for Mary as a part of the church’s corruption. We have slowly come to a more balanced view of Mary in the 21st centuries however, though our uneasiness still

lingers. And in a way it is important to talk about St Mary and Mary Sumner together. For they both represent women of God who were first and foremost Mother's. Mothers who cared deeply for their children and for God.

As for St Mary, she seems to be making resurgence in some quarters, or at least the recognition of her as playing an important part in the life of our Lord. Many protestant congregations throughout America are now having the conversation about Mary, her importance in the scriptures, and her importance as a mother.

An important point as we gather on the day we appoint as Mother's Union Sunday in this parish.

There are many wonderful passages concerning Motherhood throughout the scriptures. Today's Gospel reading is the story of Jesus walking on water. In this passage we get that powerful statement, 'do not be afraid.' And this is the same message given to Mary when she is told by an Angel of Jesus' birth. For she was to share in her sons suffering.

The story of Mary at the cross is a powerful one, but often forgotten. For example, Beverly Gaventa, a Princeton University scripture specialist was invited to write about Mary for a series called Personalities of the New Testament. She knew of the pulpit silence regarding the Virgin but was still somewhat shocked to find that her academic peers had been equally mute. She comments that "we

were quite happy to yammer on about Mary Magdalene, about whom we know next to nothing, and you could find a bajillion essays on doubting Thomas. But there was very little on Mary's presence at the cross."

This has always been a striking omission and though the first three gospels don't place Mary there by name, many readings assume she is one of the women who remain, watching Christ's agony, after the male disciples have fled. In the account that we have heard from John's Gospel she shares that witness with an unnamed disciple (often thought to be John) and Jesus, near death, commends them to each other, "woman, behold your son!" and telling John behold your mother. Mary makes one final appearance, as the only name woman in a mostly male group gathered in an "upper

room" who, guided by the Holy Spirit, will make up the new church.

Mary has an extraordinary role as mother, not only for Jesus but for that infant community of disciples who will eventually spread her son's message of love and reconciliation.

Mary's presence with the early church is inspiring, especially her excruciating presence during her son's death which has been said to have kept Christians witness intact almost singlehandedly through its darkest moment. Others have focused on the absence of most of the male disciples, where only the love of a devoted mother remains strong. Mary therefore stands out as not only a mother but an important disciple in the life of the church, one to be honoured and admired.

Whatever perspective you take on Mary and her presence alongside Jesus on that Good Friday, we have to acknowledge that she upholds for mothers everywhere, the love and devotion that we all aspire too, a sacrificial love that always puts others first. And I think because of this, she is relevant to all of us who seek to bring life and love to others. As well as reminding us of figures such as Mary Sumner, who saw a need of Mother's to be cared for and encouraged.

And so the timelessness of Mary is in the fact that she represents all those who show motherly love to others. I think it is equally important to recognise that you don't have to be a biological mother to know the richness and joy of motherhood. Many cannot have children, or choose not to, but this in no way

denies that fact that many care and love children with the same devotion. Often times many interpreters have neglected the many strong women littered throughout the scriptures, it is important to recognise them more than ever, acknowledging their role as disciples of Christ, if we do this, I think we are all the more richer.

Mother's Union Sunday is an opportunity for us to recognise the role our own mothers have played in our formation as adults, to ponder that love, and be challenged by mothers like Mary, to represent strong love and faithfulness and reflect on the many gifts God has given us, mothers been one of those special ones. **Amen**