

Mothers eh! Can't live without them, can't live with them.

John Henry Newman, that famous Anglican priest who converted to Rome in the mid 19thC and became Cardinal Newman, had no problem with faith, but he did have big problems with his mother. He got her to lay the foundation stone for the church he created at Littlemore, just outside Oxford. When she died, Newman, out of tortured guilt for his loveless relationship with his mother perhaps, raised an extraordinarily ghastly memorial to her, a ridiculous alabaster figure of his mother discussing the plans for the church with two angels.

And then, when the dust had settled, a window was erected at Littlemore- which despite its Victoriana, is telling indeed. It is, I believe, but please correct me if I am wrong, unique. Its theme is commonplace and is a visualization of today's Gospel. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the beloved disciple, assumed in tradition to be John, standing at the foot of the cross. The uniqueness, as you can see on the front of the pew sheet, where part of that window is produced, is the intimacy. We are used to seeing the images of Mary and John at the foot of the cross as figures separated from one another, apart, each grieving alone, as they watch and wait for the inevitable death of their beloved son and friend. Here the image is rather different.

Here the image is one of intimacy and shared grief. Look carefully for here in this image is Mary and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross, yes, but here they are both embracing the cross, so close are they to it, and holding hands with each other. Their gaze is turned towards each other, in support, in encouragement, in the shared pain of grief, facing each other, and facing a new future, in which the cross, so central, will define so much, but it will not divide them.

In churches of a more liturgical , more catholic tradition, like ours, it is usual to read the Gospel from the middle of the church, the centre, the imagery is obvious. We turn and face the Gospel being read from the centre as the source of all life and hope, and truth and beauty, the source of all

forgiveness and reconciliation in human engagement, Jesus Christ, the living word of God, at the centre of all things, Like Mary and the beloved disciple we turn to hear the Good News at the centre of our faith.

So too the turning of our hearts and minds, this Mothering Sunday, in the midst of Lent, begs us turn. Newman. Like so many others lived with the aloneness of his sterile relationship with his mother. He wrote 'I who never thought anything more precious than her sympathy and praise, had none of it'. His mother, who totally disapproved of the journey he was taking in his faith, made her feelings extremely plain. It's a pattern we see so often repeated- parental displeasure, lack of affirmation, criticism, damaging the child, stunting the child's

growth and self-worth, a scar for life, so often, and, so often repeated in a cycle of endlessly fractured relationships throughout generations.

Yet, this image of this Gospel, perhaps hints at another way. This Good News, spoken by Jesus in agony on the cross 'Woman, here is your son' and to the disciple, Here is your mother, - relationships are not boundaried by genetics, nor is genetic relationship the only way of building familial care.

The cross begs us face the reality of pain and loss, of seeming failure and destroyed reputation, of destruction of all that is hoped for.....and yet, and yet, comes like a fresh shoot from the stump of this angry tree, a foretaste of resurrection, that when we turn towards it, indeed, embrace it, and each

other who surround it, there is the possibility of something different, something new.

It does not remove the huge shadow of the cross, nor the reality of its consequences, but it does, allow for something lovely to grow in and beyond its shadow. The death throes of Jesus are the birth pangs of the Church- in which we will grow, through that shadow, when we turn afresh towards the cross, embrace all its pain, and hold to each other, in witness to its loss and its victory.

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