**A sermon preached by Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry,**

**at the Chrism Eucharist and Renewal of Ministerial Vows**

**in Coventry Cathedral Maundy Thursday, 2021**

**I Kings 17.8-24; John 19.25-30**

**The widows of Zarephath and Nazareth, and their sons and saviours**

There was a drought in the land.

The widow of Zarephath was about to die, first of grief from the death of her son, soon to die in her arms, then from her own thirst and hunger.

The widow of Nazareth was soon to die a death of grief, a sword was piercing her soul with such ferocity she thought she would never recover, and then all the material risks that came to a first-century widow that could cause her physical death.

God sent someone to save the widow of Zarephath. She trusts him with her meal and oil, and he promises they will last till the rains arrive. All seems well until her son becomes so ill ‘that there was no breath left in him’. Where is her saviour now?

The saviour sent by God takes her son, stretches himself out over the child, crying out to God and breathing, no doubt, all over the boy, and life returns to the son, and the saviour returns son to mother.

God sent someone to save the widow of Nazareth but birth and life are more complicated for Mary: the son and the Saviour are one: stretched out on a cross, crying out to God, ‘It is finished’ till ‘there is no breath left in him’.

Agony beyond description for the dying son and for the mother who gave him birth and breath at risk (like all mothers) to her own life and now stands with him (with other women) as he dies, risking her own life again.

The saviour of the widow of Zarephath took her son from her bosom and carried him away from her – her grief would not help him now, her body would not revive him. Something more than even her life and love was needed to return life to her son.

William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, suggests that the Saviour of the widow of Nazareth saves this woman from the agony of seeing her son’s breath leave him in the final moments of his crucifying death. The son makes arrangements for the mother to leave the scene; and how sweet and tender are those arrangements:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman [it’s more like dear woman in John’s Greek] . . . Dear Woman, here is your son’. Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother’. And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

**Here I am for you**

‘He took her to his own home’. That, like most of John’s words and phases, carries a lot of freight and does a lot of work. It’s not just about giving someone accommodation. It’s about receiving someone into what is your own – all that is your own. It’s there in the Prologue in chapter 1: Jesus came to his own, his own people but they didn’t accept him. It’s there at the Washing of the Feet in chapter 13: he loved his own, he loved them to the end. It’s there at the end of the Farewell Discourses in chapter 16: the disciples will be scattered, Jesus says, ‘each one to his own home, and you will leave me alone’.

Here, though, at the cross are the saviour’s mother and the disciple whom he loved. They accept him. They have not left him alone. And now he says to his mother: ‘here is your son’ and to the disciple, ‘here is your mother’.

There’s a lot going on here, as well. Yes, the son is caring for his mother. He loves her and he does not want her to be alone. That is true but it is implied, understated. What is stated is that his mother and his disciple are to enter into a new relationship with each other, and, thereby, a new relationship with him.

The Saviour-son does not say, ‘Here is my mother for you to look after’ or ‘Here is my beloved disciple for you to look after’. He says, ‘Here is your mother’. My mother is your mother. ‘Here is your son’. My beloved is your beloved. ‘Very truly I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me’. ‘Dear woman, here is your son, receive him for I am in him and my Father is in me’. Beloved disciple, whose name will be untold, ‘Here is your mother, receive her for I am in her and my Father is in me’. Here I am for you in the one I give to you.

And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

And so the church is born – born in the hour of humiliation in the death that is the hour of the glorification of the Son in sacrifice and triumph.

The church born at the foot of the cross. The church born in the solidarity of suffering, sharing each others burdens and griefs. The church bearing the identity of Jesus, carrying his presence, being his community of friends, being his new family of the kingdom of God.

**Alone but not alone**

‘After this’, says, John – not immediately but later in the day – the hour runs its course. The physical agony intensifies: ‘I am thirsty’. But there are other agonies at work. There is the agony of aloneness. ‘He came to what his own, and his own people did not accept him’. And now, if William Temple is right, because he wanted to save his mother from the agony of seeing her son hang on the cross till the point at which ‘there was no breath in him’, he is parted even from his own mother. Utterly alone.

And yet not alone, for ever bound to his people, for ever accompanied by the community of those who receive him that grows around his mother and beloved disciple: the church through whom, through the ages, he will apply the salvation that he wins in this hour.

And so he can declare, ‘It is finished’. The work is done. The church is founded. The work goes on.

Then breathes his last breath. For John this is more than our translation suggests – a giving *up* of his spirit. This is a giving *over* of his spirit, a handing on of his spirit to his people.

‘See, your son is alive’, said the saviour to the widow of Zarephath. Was it from another Mary that the widow of Nazareth heard the news, ‘I have seen the Lord’? Or was it from the beloved disciple? From whomsoever she heard that her son was alive she knew then that at the awful – awe-filled – hour, Jesus had turned the stagnant waters of human life expiring into the rich wine of the resurrection. The first sign at Cana dwarfed by the seventh sign of the cross.

**Where are you?**

Where are you in this story:

* Elijah: a type of Christ, expending himself in ministry?
* The widow of Zarephath: worn down by drought and worn out through looking after others?
* The widow of Nazareth: standing faithfully at the cross when everything she loves is dying?
* The disciple: unnamed, whom John calls beloved?

Who was he, this beloved disciple? Well I still follow the old fashioned view that this was John, brother of James. But I also take the ancient interpretation (that sounds strangely modern though it goes back to at least Origen in the 3rd century): that John doesn’t name the beloved disciple because he wants – Jesus wants – each of us to know that we are that person, whom Jesus loves. The beloved disciple is you.

And having mentioned Origen, I end with the words of his introduction to John’s gospel:

Nobody can really understand this gospel

until they too have reclined on the heart of Jesus . . .

There’s a second half to that sentence that I quote to be fair to Origen and because in late April when I head into sabbatical I want to think about it some more:

Nobody can really understand this gospel

until they too have reclined on the heart of Jesus

and received Mary as mother as the beloved disciple did.