

MARY, MOTHER OF SORROWS: *MATER DOLOROSA*

Time is flying. The weeks go speeding by and the end of another Church Year is almost upon us. Just a week from today we come to the “Sunday Next Before Advent,” as the Prayer Book quaintly puts it. For reasons stated in our last sermon, we are concluding the present Church Year with three reflections on the Blessed Mother of Our Lord. Two weeks ago we spoke of Mary, Mother of God. Today, our focus is Mary, Mother of Sorrows. Next week it will be Mary, Queen of Heaven.

And the angel Gabriel said, “Hail thou that art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.” With what unequalled joy must Mary here been filled by the angel’s message, once she got over the astonishment. “Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest.” Then later she heard the words of her cousin, Elizabeth, “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” How blest indeed was she, who then exclaimed, “My soul doth magnify the Lord; my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.”

And before many months had passed the joy of expectation gave way to the joy of birth—and what a birth, with all the attendant marvelous signs: shepherds coming in from the fields with word of an angel announcing good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people and then of a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, singing, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace.” Later came the Magi with word of a great star they had followed from the east until it stood over the place where the baby lay. Then when they went to Jerusalem for her purification, old Simeon took the child in his arms and said, “Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.” What joys beyond compare filled young Mary’s heart, and joy upon joy flooded her whole being. . . . But then, just a moment, later old Simeon lowered his eyes from gazing heavenward, looked momentarily at the child and then at

the mother. His eyes were no longer smiling. They were filled with shadows of dark foreboding. Fixing Mary's gaze with his, he uttered his dark prophecy: "Behold this child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against. Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Weeks went by, and months and years. There was much joy in this oh-so-precious Son and some pain as well, as when they went to Jerusalem when he was twelve and the boy stole away from them. When they finally found him, he rebuked them, "How is it that you sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" As the years continued to pass other events followed that tried her soul, as when he answered her abruptly at that wedding in Cana or when he ignored her request for a word with him and instead told the crowd that heard the exchange that they who hung on his words and followed them, they were his mother and brothers. She must have been cut to the quick.

But all of that was as nothing compared with the end—the arrest of her Son, that mockery of a trial, the hate-filled mobs, the sentencing, the journey, beaten and battered, to Golgotha dragging the cross. Then the nails, the lifting of the cross until it jarred into its socket in the ground, the darkness, the ignominy, the jeering even of the criminals who were crucified with him, and finally that awful cry of dereliction. Oh, even there her loving Son thought of her and committed her into the care of blessed Saint John. But her welfare wasn't her concern then. He was her concern. True, she had not always understood him, but she knew he loved her as no other Son loved a mother. Yea, and with that same love, that perfect love, he had loved the unlovable, the publicans, sinners, prostitutes, the rich young man, the blind, the possessed. He even wept for Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee. How often would I have gathered thy children together even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and ye would not." All this flashed through her mind as she stood on that dark and blood-drenched mount.

And did Mary, standing there beside the cross, remember at all the words of old Simeon in the Temple those many years before. Remember or not, the sword *did* pierce her soul:

At the cross her vigil keeping,
 stood the mournful mother weeping,
 where he hung, the dying Lord:
 There she waited in her anguish,
 seeing Christ in torment languish,
 in her heart the piercing sword.

Mary. Mother of Sorrows. *Mater Dolorosa*. I will not try to describe her. The *Stabat Mater* does it best, especially as set to music by a long line of the greatest composers from Palestrina to Górecki.

With what pain and desolation
 with what grief and resignation
 Mary watched her dying son
 Deep the woe of her affliction
 when she saw the crucifixion
 of the sole begotten one.

Did we know Mary only as the Mother of God, only because she was the chosen vessel of the incarnation, only because of her grace and her joy, her soul that magnified the Lord, then we would not know that hers is a heart to which every broken heart, every son's mother, every human being can repair. In his *Faust*, Goethe has Gretchen in her hour of crisis pray to the *Mater Dolorosa*: "Incline thy countenance graciously to my need, thou who art abounding in pain. With the sword in thy heart and with a thousand pains thou dost look up at the death of thy Son. Thou dost look to the Father and send sighs upward for [thy Son's] trial and for thine."

Mary stood by the cross, "her vigil keeping," until he said, "It is finished" and gave up the spirit. The next scene is represented best by the artists, the sculptors especially, in the *Pieta*. Some show Mary with Joseph of Arimathea and John lowering his body from the cross. The most famous, of course, that of Michelangelo, in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, has Mary alone holding her dead Son.

Bishop Thomas Grady who was the Roman Catholic Bishop of Orlando before he retired in 1990, and who was very kind and supportive of me in my ecumenical work, was a man of deep devotion to our Lord and to Mary. He had a poet's soul and a great fondness for Gerard Manley Hopkins. It was he who oversaw the building of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., as the Shrine's director from 1956 to 1967 when the upper church was built. It was my privilege while Director of Program

for the Florida Council of Churches to arrange for a public dialogue concerning Mary between Bishop Grady and the Reverend Ross Mackenzie, a Presbyterian theologian. The two had a great deal in common. They were both recipients of the Shrine's Patron Medal and were not far apart in their feeling for Mary.

In the late 1980's Bishop Grady wrote a little book entitled *The First Disciple: Reflections on Mary of Nazareth*. The sixth reflection was entitled, "Our Lady of Sorrows." I would like to read you some of what he writes so beautifully,

Michelangelo's *Pieta*, once marred by a vandal's hammer blow and now perfectly restored, is again displayed in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It is in the same chapel, far back in the nave where it formerly was. But now it's behind an invisible wall of plexiglass, beautifully illuminated with soft, even light, tilted very slightly forward for perfect viewing. Somehow the new arrangement, though necessary, seems too perfect, antiseptic, cool, remote. Before the vandalism, the little chapel in the back was just another chapel, dark as the rest. It housed not an exhibit, but a great piece of sculpture. One could linger in the shadows near the statue, letting its meaning slowly, powerfully take hold.

Somehow the genius of Michelangelo has made the marble supple and soft and expressive of heartbreak. Mary, carved large, holds the dead Christ, carved small, in her arms. The marble says: look at Mary, at the enormity of her grief, the terrible reduction of her Son. Her posture, right arm supporting the body of Christ, left hand extended, as in an embrace, an offering, an expression of measureless pain. She is every mother holding her dead child, every person grieving for someone dear and departed. She's every man and woman grieving over lost dreams or shattered hopes. She is the heartbreak of all humanity. She is the sadness of life.

[As an aside, one might remember her when we think of the mothers today who must welcome back their soldier sons from lands far away in flag draped coffins.]

The *Pieta* has a universal meaning because it articulates a peak moment of human grief: a perfect mother grieving over a perfect Son, innocence sacrificed for evil, ultimate tragedy without fault.

The prophecy of Simeon concerning Mary was fulfilled: "You yourself will be pierced with a sword, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be laid bare." (Lk 2:35). Words from the Book of Lamentation describing Zion in her desolation may well apply to Mary, daughter of Zion: "Come all you who pass by the way. See whether there is any suffering like my suffering." (Lam 1:12).

Mary's grief was not self-centered. It was true compassion: that is, suffering for Christ and for us.

[Bishop Grady then draws a contrast between passion and compassion.]

Passion is self-pity. Sometimes our sufferings—those sufferings about which we ruminate a great deal, those in which we seem to luxuriate and which we carefully and at great length explain to our friends—are internal matters. They occur within a circle drawn around myself: “Oh, my headache . . . I’m so tired . . . I’m so busy . . . Nobody understands me . . . the person who got my job is a fraud . . . my whole world is going wrong.”

Compassion, on the other hand, is grief endured for others. Mary’s pain was centered on Christ and on us. She suffered because He was born in a stable and because He died on a cross. And because Jesus asked her to, she grieves for each heartache of ours. . . .

Under the cross, Mary was Eve holding Abel in her arms and grieving for Cain. She was Israel holding in her arms the Prince of Israel, mourning for her children who had not known their brother. She was the Church holding in her arms the new Adam slain, grieving for all His brothers and sisters.

Under the cross, Mary wept for Mary, the lonely woman of Nazareth, a woman holding her dead child. She wept for her Son, once held newborn in her arms, nursed at her breast, boy in her home, man in her house, dead between thieves. She wept for her dead Son.

Holding the weight of redemption, she wept for all humanity. *Pieta*, you are not marble. We are.¹

Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, Florida, on the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity, November 13, 2011. Copyright © 2011.

¹ Thomas J. Grady, *The First Disciple: Reflections on Mary of Nazareth* (Orlando, FL: The Office of Christian Communication, Catholic Diocese of Orlando, 1987), pp. 38-39.