

Woman, behold your Son. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 22 May 2013.

Those of you who were here two weeks ago may remember that we then began a short series of talks about the so-called 'Seven sayings from the cross'. As we noted then, no less than three of our Lord's seven sayings from the cross focused on the needs of others. Two Wednesdays ago, we considered His prayer for the forgiveness of those immediately responsible for His crucifixion ... of those we might well label His murderers. Soon after, He turned His attention to the practical needs of Mary, His mother, and, finally, he addressed the deep spiritual needs of a repentant malefactor. As we said two weeks ago, this is a wonderful Saviour indeed – who, in His hour of extreme anguish and pain, should concern Himself with the needs of others, whether those of murderer, mother or malefactor.

Two weeks ago, we thought about a centurion and four soldiers who stood on guard at the cross. This week our reading draws our attention to an apostle (John) and four ladies who stood by that same cross. Not now then four men, but four women. John himself records the incident as follows ...

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took His garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier ... but standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.¹

Perhaps I should explain that our Lord's words to His mother and to the beloved disciple are normally bracketed together and treated as a single 'cry' ... which is why we speak of seven and not eight cries from the cross.

In our reading, John strikes a deliberate contrast between the two groups of people who stood there at the time.² On the one hand, John was saying, there were *four gambling soldiers together with their centurion*; on the other hand there were *four devoted women³ together with himself*.⁴

It is no small tribute to John's love for the Saviour that he – who, in company both with his brother James and with Peter had earlier witnessed our Lord's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and who, in company with just Peter, had earlier entered the palace of the high priest for our Lord's private examination before Annas, should now venture alone to associate himself with our Lord in His humiliation and death on the cross itself.

Who better therefore to have committed into his hands the immediate care of our Lord's mother?

And if any should wonder why it was that the Saviour chose John rather than His (the Lord's) own brothers for this privilege, let them remember that John was close to hand – which our Lord's brothers were not – and that, as John himself had noted earlier in his gospel, they (our Lord's brothers) did not yet believe in Him.⁵ Nor should we forget that John himself was a blood relation to Mary ... he was her nephew.⁶

But, although there were four women standing by the cross, John tells us that Jesus had eyes for only one – that He 'saw His mother' ... as from His cross He looked into the face of the woman of whom, according to the second chapter of Luke's gospel, godly Simeon had said at the time of our Lord's consecration in the temple, that, metaphorically, 'a sword will pierce through your own soul'.⁷ And today was the day!

Perhaps, just for a moment, my Lord remembered the time He had entered the world through her womb ... perhaps He recalled the time when she had watched Him grow up as an infant, and had washed, clothed and fed Him ... perhaps He thought of the thirty years they had shared together in lowly Nazareth. I do not know.

But I do know that His mother had now reached an age at which, in normal circumstances, she would have looked to Him, her first-born Son, for support. But, instead, she was compelled by her very love for Him to stand and witness Him suffer the humiliating and agonising death of a condemned criminal. Surely He must have seen the misery written across His mother's face as she stood there ... helpless. His wounds bled but she could do nothing to staunch the blood. His mouth was parched but she could do nothing to moisten it. Arms which had once gently clasped her neck were outstretched out on the tree but she wasn't able to caress them.

Doubtless He knew that every lash of the soldier's scourge had made her wince – that she had felt each iron spike driven through His hands and feet – that every taunt and cheap jibe flung in His teeth had wounded and stung her too. Oh yes, He knew that His mother certainly didn't feel 'highly favoured' and 'blessed among women' now!

And how, we reverently enquire, did the Saviour Himself feel when, knowing all that *she* was suffering, from His cross He 'saw' his mother'?

But, whatever else, He knew that she must be provided for. And so, with His *words* – if not with His *eyes* also – He directed her gaze towards John, and John's gaze towards her ... 'behold, your son ... behold, your mother'.

And with those few words the Saviour accomplished at least two things.

First, without actually saying it, He charged John to take Mary into his care – which it seems that John did immediately. For, as we read, '*from that hour that disciple took her to his own home*'.⁸ And so, I suppose you could say, that, if when he first knew the Lord, at our Lord's word ('Follow me'), John had left a father *for* Him (for we read that John and his brother James 'immediately left the boat and their father and followed Him'⁹) now in the closing hours of our Lord's life on earth, and again at our Lord's word ('Behold, your mother'), John gained a mother *from* Him.¹⁰

I said that our Lord was telling John to take Mary into his care. And so He was. Indeed, scholars assure us that the very form of expression used, 'behold, your son ... behold, your mother', amounted to the gift of something upon one's death¹¹ – which, again they assure us, it was perfectly legal for a crucified man to make.¹² And so, using what was in effect an official formula, Jesus 'bequeathed' His mother to John, and in so doing, placed her under John's immediate protection.¹³

We read how the soldiers responsible for our Lord's crucifixion 'took' our Lord's garments. And so, because by law the garments of an executed man automatically became the property and 'spoil' of the soldiers on duty, it was these men – and not our Lord's mother – who effectively inherited His earthly possessions. But although therefore the Saviour was in no position to grant Mary His clothes, He could – and did – give her something far better ... He gave her somebody to provide for her, both then and after His death.

And, in so doing, I guess we could say that, from the pulpit of His cross, He preached a sermon on the fifth Commandment, 'Honour your father and your mother' – a Commandment He Himself had quoted on two earlier occasions.¹⁴

But I suggest that, with His words, 'Woman, behold, your son', the Saviour was doing more than providing for her immediate future. I suggest that these words were also, in effect, His 'farewell', His 'goodbye'. For, as I understand them, they marked the close of an earthly relationship which He and Mary had shared for a third of a century.

Oh, I know that it is quite likely that Mary and the Lord met again soon after His death – during the 'forty days' when, according to the opening of 'the Acts of the Apostles', 'He showed Himself alive' to His disciples 'after His passion'.¹⁵ Certainly we know that Mary was present among the 120 disciples at the 'upper-room' prayer meeting immediately following the Lord's ascension, for we read there that the apostles 'continued steadfastly in prayer, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus'.¹⁶

Yet even if Mary *did* meet the Saviour during that forty-day period, their relationship would have been very different then. For then she would have been simply a disciple along with the rest. He would then be no longer her Son; He would be to her the risen, living Lord and Saviour – a relationship which is equally open to each of us here today by faith in Him.¹⁷

End notes

¹ John 19. 23-27.

² Although verse 25 opens with the word 'Now' in the King James Version, this would probably better be translated as 'But' ... as it is, for example, in both the Revised Version and the English Standard Version. Certainly, the Greek construction which John uses at the close of verse 24 and the opening of verse 25 draws a deliberate contrast between the two groups of people in view. By the two small particles ($\mu\grave{\epsilon}\nu$ in v. 24 and $\delta\grave{\epsilon}$ in v. 25), John strikes a contrast between the two groups. It would be accurate to render his words, '*On the one hand*, the soldiers ... did these things. But, *on the other hand*, there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene'.

³ I say 'four' women because 'Mary the wife of Clopas' is clearly not to be identified with our Lord's 'mother's sister' – because if you do read verse 25 that way you end up with the most unlikely circumstance of two sisters both having the same name, 'Mary'. In their accounts of the crucifixion, Matthew and Mark identify only three ladies who, along with other women who had ministered to our Lord when He was in Galilee, 'looked on from afar'. These were, Matthew and Mark tell us, 'Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome, the mother of Zebedee's sons', Matt. 27. 55-56; Mark 15. 40-41.

When I read of Mary Magdalene here in John's account, I enjoy the thought that she, who, according to verse 11 of the following chapter, later 'stood' outside our Lord's sepulchre, now 'stood' alongside His cross.

When comparing the gospel narratives, there can be little doubt that 'His mother's sister' in John was one and the same as 'Salome, the mother of Zebedee's sons' in Matthew and Mark. Else we are left with John making no reference to the well-attested presence of his own mother at the cross. The identifying of 'Salome, the mother of Zebedee's sons' as the Lord's 'mother's sister' would go a long way, of course, to explain why, according to Matthew 19 and Mark 10, she and her sons had once presumed to ask the Lord to allocate positions of importance to her sons, granting them to sit on thrones at His right and left hand, when He, the Son of man, would sit on the throne of His glory in His manifested kingdom, Matt. 19. 20-21 (with Matt. 18. 28); Mark 10. 35-37. After all, they were 'family' – 'according to the flesh' she was His aunt and they His cousins. And, if in his day, King David had allocated the chief positions of responsibility to members of his own family – in his case his nephews – why, Salome and her sons may well have reasoned, should not the Son of David do the same?

⁴ Tradition identifies 'the disciple ... whom He (the Lord Jesus) loved' as John the apostle, one of the sons of Salome, and the author of this gospel. And I think it fair to say that all the biblical evidence points to the same conclusion.

The disciple whom Jesus loved is referred to as such five times by John, John 13. 23; 19. 26; 20. 2; 21. 7, 20. We learn from the first reference (in chapter 13 verse 23) that he was present the previous evening in the upper room, and that he was therefore one of the twelve; see Mark 14. 17. And, leaving aside our reference in chapter 19, on every other occasion this disciple is found in company with Simon Peter. Given that the only apostle associated with Peter in the following book of the New Testament (Luke's 'Acts') – and that reasonably frequently (in particular in chapters 3, 4 and 8. 14) – is the apostle John, this suggests most strongly that the disciple mentioned in verse 26 is indeed John. Add to this that the author of the gospel consistently avoids disclosing the disciple's name – a fact wholly consistent with modesty and self-effacement if John was speaking of himself, but inexplicable if the disciple in question was somebody else.

⁵ John 7. 5.

⁶ Jesus hands her into the care of the 'beloved disciple' until such time as His brothers will accept their responsibility toward her as true followers of Him. And it seems that the brothers may, quite soon, have accepted this responsibility, for Mary is later seen in their company, whereas John seems to be grouped quite distinctly from them, Acts 1. 14. Also we know that John was reasonably well-placed financially. For he had left, not only his father, but his hired servants, to follow Jesus, Mark 1. 20, and was known personally to the high priest, John 18. 15. I can't help wondering whether, as John stood by the cross and heard our Lord's exchange with one of the two malefactors crucified with Him ... whether John remembered then the request which he and his brother had asked of the Lord when He made His way to Jerusalem for the last time; namely to be assigned places on His right hand and on His left hand. Certainly John had every reason to be glad now that our Lord had not seen fit to grant that request!

⁷ Luke 2. 35.

⁸ Compare the same Greek expression in John 1. 10 and John 16. 32.

⁹ Matt. 4. 21-22.

¹⁰ Why do Matthew and Mark not include our Lord's mother along with the other ladies, and do why they locate the other ladies 'afar' off from the cross?

First, neither Matthew nor Mark mention Mary because, at the time of which they were both then writing – namely of the time of the Lord's death – she wasn't there! For in that very 'hour' when our Lord spoke to John, he (John) had taken the arm of the broken-hearted lady and had led her away to his own accommodation in Jerusalem.

And it is surely fair to assume that, after Mary's departure, when the supernatural darkness enveloped the scene of the crucifixion, the women who remained by the cross would have drawn back some way – even if, on account of

that darkness, the soldier's on guard had not themselves required everyone to keep away from all three crosses for fear of some rescue attempt.

But the fact that John immediately escorted Mary away from Golgotha also explains several other interesting features of the passion narratives.

Firstly, that John alone of the gospel writers makes no mention of those three hours of darkness – a period which slots in between verses 27 and 28. John mentions neither this period, nor our Lord's cry of desolation which marked its close, for the simple reason that, at the time, he was temporarily absent from the scene.

And, secondly, it provides a likely answer to the tantalising question, why was it that, as we read earlier from Mark's gospel, although Salome is said to have been, along with the two Marys (Magdalene and the mother of Joses), at the scene of the Lord's crucifixion ... and is said, again with the two Marys, to have come to the sepulchre early on the first day of the week ... why was it that she was conspicuous by her absence when, according to the last verse of Mark 15, the two Mary's witnessed the Lord's burial? It seems to me that John, immediately following our Lord's words to him, had escorted Mary to his own home, but that he had soon returned to the place of crucifixion ... at which point Salome (being John's mother and sister to Mary, the Lord's mother, remember) had left the cross to be with her sister.

¹¹ What is known as a 'testamentary disposition'.

¹² 'A crucified man has the right to make testamentary dispositions, even from the cross. Jesus now makes use of this right, and with the official formula of the old Jewish family law he places his mother under the protection of the apostle John: "Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother!"', E. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (SCM), page 113.

¹³ The nearest parallel I have been able to trace in the ancient world comes from the writings of one Lucian, an Assyrian who wrote in Greek. In one of his books, Lucian tells of a man from Corinth by name Eudamidas, who, and I quote, "though he was himself in very narrow circumstances, had two friends who were well-to-do", one of whom was 'Aretaeus his fellow townsman'. '**When Eudamidas died**', Lucian wrote, '**he left a will behind him ... The terms of the will ... were as follows: To Aretaeus I bequeath my mother, to tend and to cherish in her old age ... Aretaeus**', Lucian added, '**most generous of heirs, accepted the ... bequest and is supporting the aged mother at this day**'.

The full story runs ... 'Eudamidas of Corinth, though he was himself in very narrow circumstances, had two friends who were well-to-do, Aretaeus his fellow townsman, and Charixenus of Sicyon. When Eudamidas died, he left a will behind him which I dare say would excite most people's ridicule: but what the generous Toxaris, with his respect for friendship and his ambition to secure its highest honours for his country, may think of the matter, is another question. The terms of the will--but first I should explain that Eudamidas left behind him an aged mother and a daughter of marriageable years;--the will, then, was as follows: *To Aretaeus I bequeath my mother, to tend and to cherish in her old age*: and to Charixenus my daughter, to give in marriage with such dowry as his circumstances will admit of: and should anything befall either of the legatees, then let his portion pass to the survivor. The reading of this will caused some merriment among the hearers, who knew of Eudamidas's poverty, but did not know anything of the friendship existing between him and his heirs. They went off much tickled at the handsome legacy that Aretaeus and Charixenus (lucky dogs!) had come in for: 'Eudamidas,' as they expressed it, 'was apparently to have a death-interest in the property of the legatees.' However, the latter had no sooner heard the will read, than they proceeded to execute the testator's intentions. Charixenus only survived Eudamidas by five days: but *Aretaeus, most generous of heirs, accepted the double bequest, is supporting the aged mother at this day*, and has only lately given the daughter in marriage, allowing to her and to his own daughter portions of ... each, out of his whole property of ...; the two marriages were arranged to take place on the same day. What do you think of him, Toxaris? This is something like friendship'. From *Works of Lucian, Volume III: Toxaris: A Dialogue of Friendship*, page 48. See ... <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl3/wl305.htm>.

And John was in no way behind Aretaeus in looking after that lady who was entrusted to his care.

¹⁴ Once to the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew 15 verse 4, and once to the so-called 'rich, young ruler' in Matthew 19 verse 19. And which was, as the apostle Paul noted at the beginning of Ephesians 6, 'the first commandment with promise'; namely, God's blessing and long life. And our Lord has certainly experienced 'length of days'!

And it can only move us to worship to find that our Lord was not so occupied with His own sufferings as to forget the needs of His mother! Well then might we say, 'What a Son was this!' – true not only to His Father in heaven, but to His mother on earth!

¹⁵ Acts 1. 3.

¹⁶ Acts 1. 12-14.

¹⁷ And this morning, the Christian knows that, in Jesus, he or she has a great and sympathetic High Priest in the presence of God who Himself once knew what it was to have an intimate earthly relationship severed by death ... that even He couldn't take an earthly relationship through the tomb.