



TILMAN RIEMENSCHNEIDER  
*The Lauffer Pieta*

## Week 2: Comfort in Mothering: Mary, Grief and Sadness

*(Luke 2.34-35; John 19.25-30)*

*The Reverend Jess Reid is Priest in Charge of New Fishbourne and Apuldram*

### Bible Reading

*Luke 2.34-35*

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

*John 19.25-30*

Meanwhile, standing near 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 beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

## Reflection

**Mary with the dead body of Jesus is a moment of devastation. This is not a mother in beatific adoration at a crib, or with stoic reserve standing at the foot of the Cross. It is a collapse of the natural order, not a child safely seated in a lap, reaching upward to touch the face of the beloved, but the sprawling useless limbs of a son, clutched one final time by his mother.**

A lifetime ago, Mary carried the infant Jesus into the temple, her heart ablaze with that heady love a newborn calls forth; the wonder at each sublime millimetre, the curve of an earlobe, every tiny perfect hair. And, at the sight of the Son of God carried reverently into his Father's house, Simeon rushed forth with his prophetic words of hope, salvation, and death: "This child is destined to be a sign that will be opposed ...and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

When Simeon pronounced his weighty words, I do not think Mary was surprised. At the heart of the fierce love of motherhood is the profound awareness of your child's fragility, their miraculous existence in a world full of pain and death. Who knew, more than Mary, that a sword would pierce her very soul? She knew it in the depths of the night as she watched the rise and fall of her infant son's chest, would know it in every moment as her baby grew: the toddler racing ahead, the child so self-possessed, the adult whom she followed as he brought the news of his Father's love and healing to Israel.

The pieta is a moment of devastation yes, but not defeat. The images of Mary holding the dead Christ are full of the same exquisite tenderness that we see in images of Mary cradling her infant: they radiate love. If Christ's teaching were empty, if all ends with the cruelty of the cross, with the shuddering reality of death, if evil is triumphant, then his mother would turn her back and walk away from the mortal remains of her son, not gather him to her chest, nor press her cheek to his. If Christ's teaching were empty, then you and I would never choose to open our hearts in love to one another. The risk of loss, the pain of grief, is simply too great to endure; we know, do we not, that love leads inexorably to the cross and death?

And yet every moment of our lives is marked by our faltering and hopeful attempts to love one another. We learn the innermost heart of those we love best, even though human memory cannot carry the intricacies of another person in their entirety. We rejoice in things that, to an outsider, are nothing more than ordinary, find our gladness in the smallest of their achievements. We do so in defiance of a world that tries to make statistics out of people or rank their worth according to their worldly success. We do this because in every moment, even in the darkest moments of grief, the light of the resurrection breaks through and proclaims, if only in a whisper, that God so loved the world.

The sight of Mary, holding the body of her son, may not seem a comfort. It should, by rights, be too painful to contemplate, but it is not. In asking his mother to love him and to bear the pain of his death, Jesus has asked more than it should be possible to give, and yet he has made it possible. With her heart open to love and so to loss, Mary professes the most profound faith in the promise of her Son that even death is no barrier to the love of God.

## Hymn

### Sing We of the Blessed Mother

*(G.B. Timms)*

Sing we of the blessed Mother  
who received the angel's word,  
and obedient to his summons  
bore in love the infant Lord;  
sing we of the joys of Mary  
at whose breast that Child was fed  
Who is Son of God eternal  
and the everlasting Bread.

Sing we, too, of Mary's sorrows,  
of the sword that pierced her through,  
when beneath the cross of Jesus  
she his weight of suffering knew,  
looked upon her Son and Saviour  
reigning high on Calvary's tree,  
saw the price of man's redemption  
paid to set the sinner free.

Sing again the joys of Mary  
when she saw the risen Lord,  
and in prayer with Christ's apostles,  
waited on his promised word:  
from on high the blazing glory  
of the Spirit's presence came,  
heavenly breath of God's own being,  
manifest through wind and flame.

## Prayer

Almighty God, when your Son was lifted high on the Cross, his mother stood close by and shared his suffering.

Grant that we too, gazing on him with love and following him to the cross, may come to know the power of his resurrection, for he is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

Amen.