

Sermon 31 March 2019 Mothering Sunday

**Colossians 3:12-17 John 19:25 -27**

John's gospel refers to four women gathered at the foot of the cross as Jesus went through his last agonising moments, and this included his mother, Mary. What agony and heartbreak this must have been for her. Not only does she have to witness, and therefore feel, his pain but she has to see him die. No mother should have to do this.

Whenever I read about a man committing some terrible crime, and I include the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre in this, my heart immediately goes out to the mother. It must just break her heart, whoever she is. How often, following a terrible crime, have we heard a mother say, 'He is still my son and I love him.' It breaks my heart when I hear that. This, of course, is the epitome of unconditional love. This is the sort of love that is promoted and encouraged by Jesus Christ. It is the sort of love we subscribe to as Christians but whether we are up to the challenge of putting it into practice, is another matter. However, it is the sort of love we celebrate today as put into practice by mothers universally. Let me come back to that in a moment.

In John's gospel, and only in John's gospel, we read of a touching moment when Jesus says to his mother, Mary, 'He is your son,' indicating John. And then he says to John, 'She is your mother.' Right at the very end, wracked with pain and about to die, as if taking on the responsibility for the world's sin is not burden enough, he fulfils his responsibility as the eldest son, in making sure his mother will be cared for. And John does just that, he takes her into his home.

In our Colossians reading, Paul says, 'Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.' There is no question that unconditional love will hold any relationship together. Without that ability to forgive, because in the end that is really what unconditional love is all about, any relationship will falter and eventually fail. If we relate this to the family, how important is that unconditional love of a mother in holding a family together. I refer you to that line in the piece about Mothers on the back of our service booklet – 'A Mother is the cement which keeps her family together.'

Paul then goes on to say, 'And let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.' The verb he uses for *rule* is the word used to describe the ruling of an umpire in a sporting match, whatever

that sport may be. In other words, if you take on board the peace of Jesus Christ, the love of Jesus Christ, you are in! If you don't, you are out! I love the imagery, and it is vivid imagery. If you want to win, and who doesn't want to win, then it is most important, it is essential that we take on board the unconditional love as advocated by the Christian faith. Let's leave the family for a moment and turn our attention back to Christchurch. The promotion of love that has emanated from all and sundry, from Jacinda Adern right down to the man and woman in the street has been eye-opening and inspiring. It is a love that has transcended race, culture and religion. It is a love, that like the love of a mother in a family, has bound together the people of Christchurch, and indeed, the country. It is a love which, I believe, many people from other countries are sitting up and taking notice of. I just hope this will include some of their leaders!

A couple of days ago, I heard a fascinating statistic on the radio. It would be reasonable to assume that after a terrorist tragedy on the scale of what took place in Christchurch that people overseas would be having second thoughts about moving to New Zealand. Well, the exact opposite has happened, in the short term anyway. The enquiries about moving to New Zealand has jumped quite considerably since the Christchurch massacre. I can put this down to only one thing – the caring and compassion, the love shown by the people of New Zealand towards the Muslim people has been so inspirational that people overseas are thinking, 'That's the sort of country I want to live in.' The world is beset by attitudes of division, animosity and prejudice. The response of New Zealanders has been an antithesis of this.

It is ironic that the gunman has achieved the exact opposite of what he wanted to achieve. Out of his act of dark and twisted hate has sprung a blossoming of love and compassion that has been a beacon of light to the world. His act of vengeful barbarism has seen an outpouring of unconditional love.

There are no barriers, no qualifications or terms to unconditional love. Racial, cultural and religious prejudice have no place in unconditional love. This is the love that Jesus challenges every single one of us to practise.

One of the great things about love is that it heals. There is massive healing taking place in Christchurch right now because of this. I want to finish with a story, a true story, that illustrates the healing power of love.

Some time ago Reader's Digest carried a moving story about a baby boy in a Milwaukee Hospital. The baby was blind, mentally retarded and had cerebral palsy. The baby didn't

respond to sound or touch. His parents, for a variety of reasons, were unable to look after him. The hospital didn't know what to do with the baby. Then someone remembered May Lempke, a 52 year-old nurse who lived nearby. She had raised five children of her own. She would know how to care for such a baby. They asked May to take the infant, saying, 'He will probably die young.' May responded, 'If I take the baby, he won't die young, and I'll be happy to take him.' May called the baby, Leslie. It was not easy to care for him. Every day she massaged the baby's entire body. She prayed over him, she cried over him.

As Leslie grew, so did May's problems. She had to keep him tied in a chair to keep him from falling over. The years passed – five, ten, fifteen. It wasn't until Leslie was sixteen years old that May was able to teach him to stand alone. All this time he didn't respond to her but all this time May continued to love him and to pray over him. Then one day May noticed Leslie's finger plucking a taut string on a parcel. She wondered what this meant. Was it possible Leslie was sensitive to music? May began to surround Leslie with music. She played every type of music imaginable, hoping that one type might appeal to him. Eventually May and her husband bought an old second-hand piano and put it in Leslie's room. May took Leslie's fingers in hers and showed him how to push the keys down, but she wasn't sure that she was getting through to him. Then one winter night May awoke to the sound of someone playing Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. She shook her husband awake and asked him if he had left a radio on. He said he didn't think so but they decided they had better check. What they discovered was beyond their wildest dreams. Leslie was sitting at the piano. He was smiling and playing it by ear. It was too remarkable to be true. Leslie had never gotten out of bed alone before. He had never seated himself at the piano before. He had never struck a piano key on his own before. Now he was playing beautifully. May got to her knees and prayed, 'Thank you, dear God, thank you.'

Soon Leslie began to live at the piano. He played classical, country-western, gospel and even rock. It was absolutely incredible. All the music May had played for him was stored in his brain and was now flowing through his hands to the piano. Leslie was now 28 and began to talk. He didn't carry on extended conversations, but he did ask questions, gave simple answers and make brief comments.

Leslie went to play concerts for church groups, for civic organisations, cerebral palsy victims and their parents. He even appeared on national television. Doctors described Leslie

as an autistic savant, a person who has brain damage but extremely talented. They cannot explain this unusual phenomenon. May cannot explain it either, but she does know how this talent was released – through love.

This story dramatizes in a moving way the tremendous power of love. Through love, God has put at our disposal the greatest power there is in the world. It can change lives, but even on an everyday basis, it is the most nourishing, assuring, essential thing we have, and the great news is, every single one of us has the ability to provide.

Today we celebrate that love as expressed through mothers, and has also been shown in the aftermath of what has just become known as ‘Christchurch.’