

God & Mothers

In commemoration of Mother's Day, we spend this week reflecting on the role of mothers in the life and ministry of Jesus, particularly, in the Gospel of Matthew. Sometimes for good, sometimes for ill, mothers are influential. Matthew portrays some of each, not only as role models for mothers of every generation, but also to prompt all children of mothers to reflect on their influence and role in our lives.

Day 1: Matthew 1:3-6 The gospel offers redemption to all

Expectant parents tend to pour over their own childhoods, to identify lessons to guide them as parents, and especially to identify mistakes to avoid in raising their own children. Sadly, few of us entirely succeed: the patterns tend to be deeply encoded in our genes and our psyche. So, in more somber moments, older parents eschew the mistakes they made raising their children: tempers enflamed, voices raised, expectations unrealistic, words of encouragement too few and far between. But our mistakes tend to be nothing like those of the women in Jesus' genealogy. Yet despite their flaws, God used them in the maternal line of his son.

Within three verses, Matthew highlights four women in Jesus' genealogy, and never so many again in such short space. So clearly he finds these women particularly instructive. What do they share in common, apart from gender? For one, they are likely all gentiles: Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba the wife of a Hittite. For another, three – and possibly four – were sexually scandalous: Tamar seduced her miscreant father-in-law; Rahab was a prostitute; Bathsheba an upwardly mobile adulterous (Matthew draws special attention to her sin by describing her as 'Uriah's wife' rather than using her name). Ruth is the one partial exception: the biblical text gives no indication that she seduced Boaz, but she was certainly rather forward in approaching him while he slept at night). Likely, Matthew draws attention to these suspect women in Jesus' ancestry because his own mother was suspect: pregnant outside of marriage. An angel appeared to Joseph to clear up the ambiguity (Matt 1:19-20), but without direct angelic revelation, neighbors and friends would draw the obvious – albeit erroneous – conclusion.

So the gospel – in our time as in Matthew's – is not just for men, but also for women; not just for Jews, but also for gentiles; not just for the morally upright, but also for the morally suspect. It is for all: those whose birthright appears to provide them immediate access, and those whose lifestyle would otherwise exclude them.

Day 2: Matthew 2:13-18 The gospel promises safety to none, but provides salvation for all

Before sociology ever began as an academic discipline, a French nobleman named Alexis de Tocqueville toured America to study its national culture and character. One feature that struck him as conspicuous – and still persists today – is America's greater religious fervor, when compared to Europe. Another feature that struck him was the primary motive for American religious practice. Americans are thoroughly pragmatic, de Tocqueville noted, and this applies even to their religion: they worship God for the practical advantages which they might gain from him. Even more striking: Americans, he noted, are not willing to settle for pragmatic advantage in eternity, but want advantages in this life also. Concretely, we tend to assume that being on good terms with God will make our lives smoother, and, if we have children, will make their lives go more smoothly also. We entrust our children to God, and hope that under his blessing, they will study hard, gain entrance into the best colleges, get good jobs, have happy marriages, and sire healthy children who continue the cycle.

In this passage, though, we see Mary herself, with husband and child, fleeing a holocaust. We also see other mothers and their children who did not manage to escape. Especially toward the latter half of his reign, Herod was a crazed paranoid, executing even family members whom he perceived to be political rivals. It is perfectly consistent with his character to murder the likely 10-20 male infants in small-town Bethlehem just to be sure he eliminated any rival to his rule.

For Matthew, this massacre recalls two Old Testament parallels. For one, Herod is an updated version of Pharaoh, who in Moses' time indiscriminately killed Jewish infants (Exodus 1-2). For the other, such grief is reminiscent of the exile, when Israel ceased to exist as a nation, many of its leaders were killed, and the rest, deported (Jeremiah 31:15). God did not protect his people – not even their children – when Pharaoh came to kill. He did not protect his people – not even their children – when Herod came to kill. This is a caution that he may also not protect our families.

At the same time, both parallels include a strong element of hope. In the aftermath of the slaughter of innocents, God delivered Israel from Egypt. In the aftermath of the slaughter of exile, God delivered Israel from Babylon. So, Matthew intimates, in the aftermath of the slaughter of Bethlehem, and in the aftermath of the slaughter of Golgotha, God will deliver his people from their sin. In short, God may not deliver all the pragmatic benefits for which we hope. But he reliably delivers an eternal benefit which we can receive no other way. Today, which most

characterizes your attitude: disappointment over pragmatic benefits which God has not delivered? Or deep appreciation for the eternal benefit which he delivered at such great cost to himself and his son?

Day 3: Matthew 10:34-39 The gospel calls us to put Jesus above all others, even our mothers, and their children

Jesus does not soft-sell the gospel. He does not bribe people with the offer of eternal life, or the promise of an easy life. He does not offer his followers all the indulgences of this world and life in the next. Instead, he calls us to give him our highest loyalty. All other commitments are secondary. In a culture where family obligation reigns supreme, where obedience to parents was one of the Ten Commandments, ranking even above prohibitions against murder and adultery, Jesus insists that devotion to mothers and fathers must come in a distant second. In a culture like ours, which children often reign supreme, he would say the same about our devotion to our children. So his call on our lives may be detrimental to our parents, or to our children. Still, this is his prerogative: "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

This text is particularly germane as child dedication is scheduled for this coming Sunday, May 15. In child dedication, we ask God – and the church community – to care for our children. We also surrender our children to God, acknowledging that their primary loyalty must be to him, not to us, and agreeing that we will give them to God for him to use however he may choose. This is not a natural reflex, least of all in traditional Asian culture. Yet Jesus will have it no other way.

Day 4: Matthew 12:46-50 Jesus put his followers above all others, even above his mother, and above her children

Jesus can require that he take precedence over our commitment to parents, spouse, or children, because he put us above his parents, and above any opportunity to have a spouse or children. When the crowd drew Jesus' attention to his mother and siblings, he replied: "Who is my mother, and my siblings?", he asked. "These who follow me. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." He granted priority not to his nearest blood kin, but to his followers. Instead of living for his family, he died for us. Given that our Lord prioritized us above his family, it is entirely reasonable that he expect us to prioritize him above our parents or our children. Moreover, given that our culture is idolatrously individualistic – that we commonly prioritize ourselves over

even our parents and our children – Jesus also insists that we put him above ourselves.

Day 5: Matthew 19:28-29 The gospel rewards those who put Jesus above all, even above their mothers and their children

The gospel is not just about Jesus' demands, though it includes that. And it is not just about Jesus' sacrifice, though that is essential. It is also about rewards, which is, from one perspective at least, rather both redundant and surprising. Arguably, it should be sufficient that Jesus prioritized us in both his life and his death; it should be enough that he provides us eternal life. That notwithstanding, he does far more: he promises us remarkable rewards for doing nothing more than reciprocating his devotion to us, for doing nothing greater than responding as we ought to him. "Everyone who has left ... father or mother or wife or children ... for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." Given both his divinity and his death for us, Jesus has the right to insist on our devotion and sacrifice, and offer nothing more in return. Instead, he values our commitment sufficiently to offer compensating rewards. Not only compensating, but exceeding, rewards: even a hundred times as much.

Day 6: Matthew 20:20-28 An ambitious mother

Anyone who has ever been embarrassed by a mother's proud public praise can appreciate James and John's predicament when their mother approached Jesus: "Grant that my sons be your most prominent assistants when you reign over the world." Lest we fault her too severely, though, we should note that Jesus takes her to be articulating their own ambitions; he replies not to her, but to them: *You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?* To follow Jesus must necessarily be more about suffering and about service than about status: "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

For all her faults, though, this woman comes right in the end. As Jesus suffered and died on the cross, "many women were there, watching from a distance... Among them [was] ... the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Matthew 27:56). As we celebrate our mothers this week, let this be our stance: appreciation for their devotion to us – even when it embarrasses us – and even more, prayer that their devotion to Christ will exceed their love for us.