

1985

"Woman, Behold Thy Son! Son, Behold Thy Mother!"
John 19:26

With these words the crucified Christ directs the eyes of the Virgin Mary and the Apostle John away from Himself and to one another. Christ's concern, on the cross, was for His mother. His words remind us of the tragedy and the triumph of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

^{Act 1 of}
Mary's tragedy as a mother began when she presented her forty-day-old Son in the temple. Old Simeon took the Christ Child in his arms and said, 'This child is destined to be a sign which men reject; and you too shall be pierced to the heart'. The darkening shadow of that tragedy deepened twelve years later when Mary, after searching three days for her lost Son, found Him in the temple courtyard questioning the priests and scribes. 'My son', she questioned Him, 'why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' 'Don't you know', He countered, 'I have to be in my Father's house?' Scripture simply says that Mary and Joseph 'did not understand what he meant'. How could they? After all, for twelve years they'd known Him as a simple, obedient Boy growing up in Nazareth. And here, in a moment of soul-disturbing disclosure, He speaks to them in a way they'd never heard before. Mary didn't understand the meaning of His words, but she did understand that a change had taken place in her relationship to her Son. She had found the Son for whom she had been searching for three days, but she also knew she had lost Him forever to Someone else.

~~For a little while longer, however, His mind and body were to be dependent on her.~~
^{Act 2 of Mary's tragedy as a mother began when}
Luke tells us that Jesus 'went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them.' For the next eighteen years Jesus, the Son of God, was entrusted to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph who disciplined Him, taught Him and raised Him. Jesus was

subject to them. They told Him when to get up. They told Him when to go to bed. When to bring water from the village well. When to carry lumber into the carpenter shop. When to help with the grubbiest chores. It was probably Mary who acquainted Him with the Old Testament scriptures and taught Him how to pray. Mary's Son was divine. She knew that from the time of the Annunciation. Yet the second person in the Trinity, the eternal Word of God, as a human teen-ager 'was subject unto' her. When the Virgin Mary accepted the authority of God over her life she also accepted the ^{difficult} role of a disciplining ^{training the Son of God.} mother. The freedom of Jesus was restrained by her ^{How much of his compassion & love were learned by example from Mary?} authority. But when Jesus was about thirty years old He began to feel the seriousness of his responsibility and the constraint of a higher authority to which she had always pointed Him.

She knew the worst had come to pass for her when her Son laid aside the hammer and nails, the chisel, the plane, shook the wood shavings from His apron for the last time, and hurried home to tell her that He was off to hear His cousin John preach in the wilderness. The fear that she first felt when she heard the words of Simeon in the temple about a sword piercing her own heart; the fear that had been sleeping quietly within her for nearly 30 years was now awakened.

Act III of the tragedy of Mary occurred at a time when her Son was surrounded by a milling multitude. He was teaching and healing. He was telling the crowds about God's kingdom. His enemies were saying that He was stark, raving mad. His friends tried to restrain Him. Mary's love for her Son tried to seek Him out and bring Him home to her. She sent a message to Him, 'Your mother and your brothers are here outside; they want to speak to you'. 'Surely', she must have thought, 'he'll come home with me and maybe everything will be like it used to be'. But He denied her appeal, and He even shocked her more, much more, by what He then

said. 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, my sister, my mother.'

Now this was not a renunciation of His mother. Rather it was ~~the~~ a foretaste of the Gospel. Just as the Blessed Virgin became His mother only by consenting to the will of God, so we become related to Christ only by doing the will of God. The Holy Family, once made up of only Jesus, Mary and Joseph, will be immeasurably enlarged, not by natural procreation, but through submission to the will of God; as St. John writes, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God".

In the fourth and final act of her tragedy, thanks to her Son, the tragedy of Mary was turned into a triumph. It was there, beneath His bloody cross, that Jesus gave Mary and St. John the gift of each other; Mary was given a son and John was given a mother! Jesus, on the cross, created for all of us fresh bonds of kinship. At the cross a new family is born; a new creation begins. The mother of Jesus becomes the second Eve, and our mother; the apostles become our brothers. 'Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, my sister, my mother'.

None of us will ever know what it cost Mary, in terms of brokenness of heart and sadness of soul, for her Son to set out to gather from all the nations of the earth one family in which he is at the same time the Head and Son and Brother. ^{Every blow of the hammer that drove the nails through the hands of Jesus pierced her heart as well,} God, our heavenly Father, sacrificed His only Son so that we might become members of the Holy Family. No less did the Virgin Mary sacrifice her only-begotten Son so that we might become, with her, members of her Sons family.

G.A. Studdert-Kennedy, an Anglican chaplain during WWI, wrote some of the most moving religious poetry of the twentieth century. In one poem he imagines a mother at the sacrament of Holy Communion who has lost her son, perhaps on some French field of battle. But as I read the poem I see the Virgin Mary ~~year after a crucifixion~~ thinking of her crucified Son as she comes to the Sacrament. As she takes the bread and wine she says these words,

Dear Lord, I hold my hand to take
 Thy Body, broken here for me,
 Accept the Sacrifice I make,
 My body, broken, there, for Thee.

His was my body, born of me,
 Born of my bitter travail pain,
~~And it lies broken on the field,~~
~~Swept by the wind and the rain.~~

*Surely a Mother understands Thy thorn-crowned head,
 The mystery of The pierced hands-- the Broken Bread.
 Amen.*

But her