

The Mother Of God

By: Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozhlt is not always easy to speak of the Mother of God to Christians whose tradition may find little or no place for her in worship or in prayer. To begin by talking about the theology of the Incarnation leads quickly to the heart of the matter, but is likely to be counterproductive. In this sermon, preached at the University Church of Great St Mary's, Cambridge, on 19 May 1985, a different approach is used: we are introduced to the person, to Mary as an example of what it means to be a Christian and a child of God. Surely this is the proper introduction to one whose fiat made salvation possible for us all. I want tonight to speak of the Blessed Virgin, of the Mother of God, in her relation to us; to try to look at what we can learn from her, what she is as an image - almost an ideal image - of what we should be. I want first of all to make a point concerning the Orthodox way of calling her the Mother of God. By this we mean simply that she is the one who brought God Incarnate into the world. Of course, she is not the mother of the Word of God according to his divinity, but without her the Word would not have been made flesh, the Son of God would not have become the Son of Man. An English writer, Charles Williams, describes the event in a most wonderful way, as it seems to me, indicating at the same time the reality of the event and the decisive role of the Mother of God. He says that when the time was right, a maiden of Israel proved capable of pronouncing the name of God with all her mind and all her will and all her flesh, and the Word became flesh. It is a gift of self, and it is at the same time an unreserved and heroic acceptance: a gift of self in humility, and an heroic acceptance because of what it could have been, what is meant humanly speaking. Some of you may remember that the word 'humility' comes from the Latin humus, the fertile ground. Humility is not a condition which we try to ape by saying that we are unworthy, that we are not as good as others imagine us to be - if they do. Humility is a condition of the earth, lying completely open and surrendered: the earth which is open to all actions, of mankind, of the rain, accepting the refuse and accepting the furrow and bringing fruit, surrendered, offered and given. This is the essence of humility and this is the kind of humility which we see in the Mother of God. And this is something which we could learn and which is so difficult to learn, because we are so continuously and so painfully afraid of offering ourselves, of surrendering, of giving ourselves to God or even to those who love us and whom we love. Surrendering gifts is frightening, because it implies also a sort of frailty. To refuse oneself, to resist, gives us a sense of strength and vigour; and yet it is not our strength that can achieve great things. You probably remember how Paul the apostle asked God to give him strength to fulfil his mission, and how the Lord said, 'My strength is made manifest in weakness. My grace sufficeth unto thee'. And the weakness of which the Lord speaks, of course, is neither laziness nor sloth nor timidity. It's another weakness, it's that of surrender. If I had to convey it in images I would speak of the way in which a child is taught to write. A pencil is put into his hand, the mother takes the hand in hers, and then begins to move it; and as long as the child does not know, and cannot foresee, what is expected of him, the lines are so perfect, the straights are straight, the curves are curved. The moment the child begins to imagine he understands what is expected of him, becomes helpful, pushes, pulls, and turns, it becomes a scribble. Isn't that exactly what happens to us when instead of listening deeply, silently, listening intently in the stillness of our heart and ready to wait on God, we make haste to understand what he wants, and try to do it before we have understood? The same is true (in terms of analogies) of the way in which a surgical glove, so frail that the nail can pierce it, tear it, put on an experienced, skilled hand can work miracles. Replace its frailty by the strength of an armour's gauntlet and nothing will be possible. And the same will apply to the image of a sail on a sailing ship. The sail is the frailest part of it and yet, directed in the right way, it can engulf the wind and carry the heavy, strong, resisting structure to its haven. This is the kind of weakness, of frailty, of surrender, that we can see in the generous gift of the Mother of God to her Lord. She is the one who is the response of the whole creation to the maker. God offering himself and the creation in her person, accepting him, receiving him, worshipping and lovingly, freely and daringly. When the Mother of God came to Elizabeth her cousin, Elizabeth exclaimed: 'Blessed is she who has believed. It will be done to her according to the promise of God'. She is the one who above and beyond all creatures has believed - believed in the sense of trusting the Lord, unreservedly and unconditionally. We do not often think of what the words of the archangel at the Annunciation spelt. The archangel told the Virgin that she will bear a child, and we wonder, we marvel, at the name of this child Jesus who is our saviour; but at that moment the promise was also a threat. According to the law of the Old Testament an unmarried girl who bore a child was condemned to stoning. She did not say, 'But this cannot be, it will cost me my life'. She did not either say 'it cannot be' because she believed that every word of God can be fulfilled, every promise of his. She said, 'Here am I, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to his will'. And his will was, humanly speaking, her death, unless a miracle occurred. We must learn something from this, because so often we are afraid of a promise or a prompting from God. What is the cost which we shall have to pay? What is the risk entailed in obeying and following the commandment of God or the call? And in that the virgin of Israel proved a worthy daughter of Abraham, the one who is Isaac. The Lord had promised to Abraham that he would have a son, that this son would be the beginning of a race as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand of the beaches. Then suddenly, when the son was already a little boy, fully alive, loved, growing, opening up to the future, the Lord commanded Abraham to bring him as a blood offering, and at that moment Abraham believed God more than he believed his promise. He trusted God to know what he was doing in the certainty that God's word was truth. The Virgin was in the same position. She trusted God because his word was truth, and we must learn if we want to belong to that new creation of which she was the first, if we want to be of the race of the Mother of God, if we want to be God's own people through whom God is present in the world, we must learn to trust, to believe, to be as faithful as she promised to be. Then we can see another moment of her life. In St John's gospel there is the story of Cana of Galilee, a wedding feast in a village, people gathered who had brought to the feast all they possessed, all they could give; and long before

their hearts were satiated with joy and with peace, long before they could say, 'We have had enough and we can go home, carrying with us a heart fulfilled', the feast was coming to an end. The family was poor, the wine was coming to its end. And then the Mother of God turned to the Lord and said they had no wine. A simple remark; and Christ turned to her with a question, on which we do not dwell because we are piously accustomed to accept whatever we read in the gospel unthinkingly, or dismiss it also unthinkingly. Christ turned to her and said, 'What have we got in common, you and me?' The question I think means, 'Are you turning to me because you are my mother, because you brought me up, because I was obedient to you in the course of all my childhood, and you expect me now to do your bidding? Or is there any other reason? If it is this, if our only link, the only thing we have in common, is your motherhood, according to the flesh, mine hour has not yet come. We are still in the realm of natural events'. The Mother of God does not argue. She does not say anything to him. She turns to the servants and says: 'Whatever he may say to you, do it'. Whatever he may say. And then Christ, seemingly contradicting his own words that his hour had not come, works the glorious miracle of Cana, transforming the waters of ablution into the good wine of the kingdom. What happened? What happened between the question and the words of the Mother of God? Just one thing. Instead of arguing she made an act of perfect faith, and by this act of faith in her divine son she established the Kingdom of God. She established Christ in this wedding feast as the king of heaven, as the Lord, and because through her the Kingdom had come, what was impossible in terms of the natural world occurred eschatologically: that is, the future and eternity poured into time, and within this eternity what cannot be contained by time happened. Here is another thing which we can learn from her. It is not enough for us to believe more or less, we must establish for others that situation which is the Kingdom of God and in which things may happen to them and for them. There is an old saying that God can enter into any realm provided a human being opens the door. We are that kind of doorkeeper. Doorkeepers usually keep doors shut: our vocation is to keep a door open for God who knocks at every door to find a door open. In moments of strife or moments of tension, when we have no words and do not know what to do, we can sit still, turn to the Lord and say, 'Lord, I believe. Come, and give us thy peace'; and continue praying in the midst of the storm, in the midst of the strife, in the midst of the terror. Pray that the Lord, who is the Lord of the storm, as he is the Lord of peace, may come and spread his peace as he did on the lake of Tiberias when he commanded the waves to be still and the wind to be silent. This is our vocation. Our vocation is to be sent like light into the darkness, with our divine hope where there is no hope; like salt where there is corruption. Our place as Christians is not in the safety of our Christian communities, but in the storm that must be stilled; at the heart of corruption that must be stopped; at the point of hopelessness where we must bring a hope which is beyond all human hope. Light that shines in the darkness, that is our vocation, and the image that we find in Cana of Galilee, so quiet and peaceful, opens up on all the tragedies of the world, all the events, great or small, that begin in a family and end in international conflict. And then, lastly, two events which I would like to bring together. The presentation of Jesus in the Temple and the Crucifixion. Every male child first-born of a woman was to be brought to the Temple as an offering. If we read back into the Old Testament about the institution of the act we discover that God commanded the Hebrews to bring the first-born male children of every family to the temple as a blood offering, as a ransom for the first-born of Egypt, who had to die that the Jews might go free. Every first-born male child was therefore brought and God had the right of death and of life upon him. Century after century God accepted a vicarious offering, turtle doves and sheep, and once only in the whole of history he accepted a human offering: his only begotten Son became man who had to die on the Cross to redeem mankind - so that the two events are really connected with one another. But the mother who brought this child knew that God had all power over him of life and death, and unhesitatingly, in humility and faithfulness, brought this child.

Later, when we see Calvary as described in the Gospel, we do not see a mother fainting or a mother protesting or a mother clamouring for mercy, as so many pictures have it. At the foot of the Cross we see the Mother of God wrapt in deep, tragic silence seeing the fulfillment of what had been begun when she brought her child to the Temple. She stood silent, at one with the divine and human will of her son: she was fulfilling the offering which she had begun thirty-three or so years before. At one with the will of God, at one with the will of her divine son, renouncing her own will, her own hopes, in an act of offering. This is something that very few of us will ever have to face in life, or at least I hope so; but it happens all the time in various parts of the world, and it has happened throughout history when one person has allowed another to give his or her life for a cause, for God or for men. Without a word of protest, sharing in the heroic offering. I would like to leave these images with you, however incomplete and imperfect they are. Look at them and ask yourselves. Where do I stand? What would I do, placed in the same circumstances? The Mother of God was the response of all creation to God's love, but God's love is sacrificial love. At the heart of the love of God there is the gift of self, the Cross. May God grant us to learn from this frail maiden her heroic simplicity and her wonderful wholeness. And let us learn from all the steps of her life, all the self-denial and the gift of self, all the beauty of her surpassing humility and its perfect obedience to the law of eternal life. Amen. Sourozh 1980. N. 21. P. 22-33