

Mackay Parish, 10th March, Lent Devotion on 'Seven Last Words from the Cross'

"Woman, behold your son! Behold, your mother!" John 19:26-27

Does God really care for us?

That may seem like an odd question to ask in this season of Lent, as we look to the suffering and death of Jesus, but... does God *really* care for us?

It is easy to say the words, "God cares for us." But it is another thing to truly believe this, to trust it in your heart, and to hold on to that thought in times of great trial and trouble...

What about the mother, who quickly leaving her children in the car for only a few seconds to duck into a shop, to hear a loud screech and crash, and to rush outside to see a semi-truck on its side, completely crushing her car and killing her three children instantly? What about the father, who now walks with a limp, whilst long ago teaching his young son to ride a bicycle has a car lose control, crush his son to death, and smashing him badly? What about the husband, visiting his wife of nearly fifty years who now cannot speak, cannot remember his name, and seems to cry continually? What about the child who has suffered horrible abuse at the hand of a relative who feels she cannot trust anyone? What about the family whose parents were brutally beaten and killed before their eyes during their country's civil war?

Does God *really* care for us? It is easy to say the words, "God cares for us." But it is another thing to truly believe this, to trust it in your heart, and to hold on to that thought in times of great trial and trouble...

When it comes to love and care, what do you think would have been going through Mary's mind – Mary who was the mother of Jesus – when she saw her son brutally beaten, mocked, abused, crucified, and now suffering and having to die? What would any parent say watching their child being executed – especially knowing He was totally innocent? Does God *really* care for us?

Jesus preached his most powerful sermon from the cross. The first three statements from the cross reveal an enormous and incredible love for others. In all three statements, Jesus was thinking of others. Jesus said, "Father, forgiven them, for they know not what they do" and in this statement Jesus was focusing on the needs of the soldiers and crowds who were ridiculing him and not on his own pain. In the second statement, Jesus was focusing on the thief on the cross when he said to the thief, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." And the same quality of love for another is found in the third statement when Jesus was concentrating on the needs of his mother and best friend. He simply said to his mother. "Here is your son." He said to his best friend, "Here is your mother." Jesus was telling the both of them: Take care of one another in the future when I am physically gone from you.

But why did Jesus ask John? And why was John the only disciple at the cross with Jesus?

The apostle John was one of Jesus' twelve disciples, the son of Zebedee, and the brother of James. Before his call by Jesus, John was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, along with his father and brother (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). His mother was probably Salome, who may have been a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is seen in bringing two parts from the Bible together.

First, standing among the women near the cross with Jesus' mother Mary was Salome (as identified by the apostle Mark in his Gospel account): "*There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Johns, and Salome*" (Mark 15:40 KJV).

Further, John (in his Gospel account) describes her relationship to Mary. "*Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, and Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.*" (John 19:25)

From the first part above we know that Salome was Mary's sister, and therefore Salome was Jesus' aunt. However, Salome is also identified the *wife of Zebedee*, as in Matthew 27:56. And Zebedee's children were James and John (Matthew 4:21): "*And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, **James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father***" (Matthew 4:21). The picture is thus complete: Salome is identified as Mary's sister and John's mother, and John, therefore, was Jesus' cousin. And John and Mary were with Jesus at the foot of the cross.

We can imagine for Mary that this would have been the most awful experience of her life. The nails that sent through Jesus' wrists could have just as well gone through her wrists. The sword that pieced his side could have just as well been thrust through her side. Jesus' pain was her pain. That is the way it is with mothers. Mary's best friends and sister were there with her, but their love and compassion did not diminish the sadness and agony she was feeling. And with them also was John.

And there, at the foot of the cross, it would be 'reasonable' to ask: does God really care for us?

But, in the midst of excruciating pain, God's care for us in times of trouble is seen in that Jesus was thinking of two people who loved him during his earthly life: his mother and his cousin who was a best friend. He asked them to care for each other, and they did that. We find that Mary and John were together in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit was given to the church in Pentecost. We also discover that Mary and John travelled to live in Ephesus. And it seems that the two people who loved Jesus most here on earth, took care of each other until their dying day.

But the question is this: what do we learn from Jesus through these words from the cross, "Here is your son. Here is your mother?"

First, Jesus taught us to love even when we are dying. Jesus could have been so overwhelmed by his own pain and suffering that he would not have thought of others. Not so for Jesus. In the midst of dying, he was still thinking of others. It is truly amazing, from our human point of view, that while Jesus was in the midst of such enormous pain, He could think of the needs and pain of others.

Second, Jesus and his friends teach us something about the way to die. Yes, we learn things from so many people as we walk through life. We learn how to fish from others; we learn how to cook from others; we learn about the details of life from others. That is just the way it is. But one important thing we learn in life is how to die. You learn how to die from other friends and loved ones. You don't learn this from books or television. Jesus and his people today teach us how to die, how to handle our death. Death is never easy. It always involves pain, not only for the one who is dying, but those who watch a person die. But, death is a reality one day we all must face.

Finally, Jesus death from the cross says that we are never alone in death.

Hanging from the cross at Golgotha, with two thieves at his either side, with hecklers below the cross, Jesus was also surrounded by the love of two people who loved him most here on earth: His mother and his best friend. But, when you and I have to face death (as difficult and painful it will be) we know that Jesus who has gone through death has also described us as his 'mothers, brothers, and sisters'. We are His family, and He will take care of us in death.

Does God care for us? It would have been easy for Mary and John to ask that question. But in his last act of compassion, Jesus focused on the needs of Mary and John, and asked them to take care of each other into the future. Jesus is our future. He takes care of us. All those people at the beginning of our sermon are real people who have faced real tragedy. And they are people in the life of the church today – who have asked that question: does God really care for us? – but who worship Christ as their God and Saviour. Amen.