

In Praise Of Mothers

[Fr Chris Gleeson SJ](#) 14 February 2024

Nearly 50 years ago, a young Year 10 boy came home from school upset, ran upstairs, and slammed his bedroom door. His mother followed him up there and sitting down on the bed beside him asked him what the matter was. He was really upset by now and said that he didn't make the school basketball squad because he was too small. That was the finish. There were no B or C or D teams – he was cut from the squad altogether because he was too small.

His mother was acutely aware that, whatever she said to the boy then could mean the difference between success and failure for him. After pausing and thinking briefly, she said: 'Son, you can never be too small. It's not the size of the person in the game that matters, but the size of the game in the person.'

PRACTISE AND PRACTISE

The next morning his mother heard the alarm bell go off at 4.30 and her son going downstairs and out into the yard to start practising. From that time on he practised every morning and evening, no matter what the weather presented. And as he practised, he kept repeating to himself: 'It is not the size of the player in the game that counts, but the size of the game in the player.'

Of course, when the basketball trials came round next season he played with such focus and skill he made the team that year and for every following year. He went on to become one of the great basketball athletes of our time, and his name is Michael Jordan.

This is a story about mothers being always there for their children, choosing the right word to say at the right time. There is a marvellous saying from the Talmud, a corpus of Jewish stories and legends, which claims that 'God could not be everywhere, so he created mothers'.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Indeed, I read recently that there are only three entities that love like God unconditionally – our mothers, our grandmothers and our pet dogs. They love us without any conditions, any strings, any corners, any ties attached. They forgive us no matter what atrocities we have committed. They accept us and love us no matter what.

At the end of May we celebrate that wonderful, yet understated Feast of the Visitation when we see two mothers-to-be – Mary and Elizabeth – singing and dancing and embracing one another. Yet what gave them cause to sing? Mary was a young peasant woman and her journey on foot over the hills to visit her cousin Elizabeth was no bed of roses. It probably took her five or six days and was not without its own dangers for a young woman in that rugged occupied territory.

These two women, as with the rest of their people, lived in a region occupied by the Roman forces. They had to endure the chaos of poverty and brutality. As women, they experienced the challenges of being a minority within a minority people.

STORY OF HOPE

What makes this Visitation scene so powerful is that Mary and Elizabeth choose to sing and dance in the chaos around them. It is a story of hope and a lesson for us that we must sing songs of hope for our own children.

Hope is not a resting-place, but a starting-point. It is a cactus, not a cushion; it should make us jump up and do something. The great Anglo-Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw, wrote: 'Life is no brief candle to me, it is a sort of splendid torch which I've got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as bright as possible before handing it on to a future generation.'

Life for us on earth is brief, although the opportunities are many, and our task is to keep the torch burning brightly so that we can pass it on to those coming behind us. It will not all be easy; there will be pain and hurt.

It is worth remembering, however, that on the darkest night the stars shine most brightly. Hope is a periscope, which enables us to see over our present problems to future possibilities. While admiring our neighbour's lawn across the fence, let us not miss the roses blooming at our feet.

PRAY FOR MOTHERS

During this autumn season we pray in a spirit of hope for all mothers that they will be life-givers and continue to reveal the female face of God to us. We thank God for our mothers for giving us life, for nourishing and enlarging that life, and for doing without that we might have. We pray for those mothers who must mother below the poverty line, who are too young to mother, and those who must watch their babies starve or grow up with hate and violence in their hearts. Above all, we pray for mothers that they may continue to sing songs of hope to us in the chaos of our world.

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