

Behold Your Son

Last Friday, the Year 12 Mothers gathered together for Mass and a luncheon. The Gospel story chosen by them was Jesus committing his mother and his good friend to each other's care as he was dying: "Behold your mother. Behold your son." This was the homily.

American lawyer and civil libertarian, Clarence Darrow, once wryly remarked, "The first half of our lives is ruined by our parents; the second half by our children." Like most witticisms, it takes an element of life experience and stretches it to the point of humour. Yes, growing up is a testing time, that search for independence and identity. Parenting, too, is a constant search – mostly for balance: between caution and trust, between intrusion and interest, between instruction and advice, between limiting freedoms and letting loose. A little like beginners learning to dance, starting with awkwardness, adopting a routine which works, sometimes blaming, looking at how others do it, treading on toes occasionally. But, in time, grace and freedom flow.

It is an interesting Gospel chosen for today. Jesus' final words to his mother and to the disciple for whom he seemed to have such affection. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus seems at times a little unthinking in his relationship with his mum – when he stayed behind in Jerusalem as a boy and was lost for three days. Rather unresponsive to his mother who points to the embarrassment of a young couple at their wineless wedding reception – he says, "What business is this to me?" Uncharacteristically blunt when his disciples tell him his mother is waiting outside to see him – "My family are the ones who hear my word and keep it," he says. But here, at the end of his mission, his feelings are clear. He entrusts her to his closest friend. "Behold your son."

Today, albeit in a quite different context, we borrow those same words – "Behold your son." Here, if you like, at the end of our mission, we hand him back to you. "Behold your son," we say. Here he is.

This time last year, some of your sons devised the student motto for the College – "My brother's keeper". It was an aphorism that caught on because it appealed to the best of what is noble and generous in them. With a minor tweaking, it could be your maxim, too. "My son's keeper." Today is a time to recall that journey in gratitude. My son's keeper. You conceived sons, bore them, nursed, cuddled and coddled them. Steered them through the crises of infancy, the sensitivities of the teen years, the times of their isolation, the loss of a first love. Refashioned them after failure, polished their angularities, learned to read the silences, forgave the hurts. You waited patiently at the door of the cave they entered in Year 9 or 10 for them to return to you. Braved the wilderness of their bedrooms, were patient with fashions and hairstyles, learned to decode conversational grunts, burst with pride in their achievements, embarrassed them with a too public or too lengthy hug or kiss. Loved them immensely in all things and in spite of all things. And each one of you treasure a lifetime's carry bag of memories and experiences that you can dip into to relive again and again and say, "Yes, the finger of God was there."

In our Catholic context, we can further plumb the depths of your motherhood. Point to a theology that underpins it. Call it a sacrament. Sacraments are the means God uses to bless us, means of grace. That sense of sacramentality is beautifully brought out in a poem by an American Episcopalian priest, Alla Renée Bozarth. She has a Celtic and Russian background, so that makes her interesting. Bozarth takes the sacramentality right back to the stable at Bethlehem to that birth. Motherhood precedes Jesus' ministry. More than that, it fashions it. Awakens it.

Before Jesus Was His Mother

*Before Jesus
was his mother.
Before supper
in the upper room,
breakfast in the barn. Before the Passover Feast,
a feeding trough.
And here, the altar of Earth,
fair linens of hay and seed.*

*Before his cry,
her cry.
Before his sweat of blood,
her bleeding and tears.
Before his offering,
hers.*

*Before the breaking of bread and death,
the breaking of her body in birth.*

*Before the offering of the cup,
the offering of her breast.
Before his blood,
her blood.
And by her body and blood alone,
his body and blood and whole human being.*

*The wise ones knelt
to hear the woman's word in wonder.
Holding up her sacred child,
her God in the form of a babe,
she said: "Receive
and let your hearts be healed
and your lives be filled with love,
for This is my body,
This is my blood."*

Parenting – indeed, teaching – is all about shaping the selfhood of the young. The selfhood of your sons; the selfhood of our students. Cultivating wisdom, values, habits. Affirming their gifts. Gently pointing out what is getting in the way of them becoming their true self. The one they want to be. Directing them into a future.

Those ultimate possibilities are unimaginable to us. Their dreams are not our dreams. Their future is not our own. But we launch them into that unknown tomorrow with those three cardinal virtues: faith, hope and love. Because we believe these fellows are the promise of tomorrow. And, meanwhile, a blessing for today.

So behold him. Behold your son.