

**Address by David James at St David's Church, Exeter, for Lent 4 Sunday, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2022**

Have any of you been watching *This is going to hurt*, the drama about the life of a junior doctor in the NHS? Millions of us have, it seems, and it is based on the diaries of Adam Kay who wrote the book of that name and also wrote the screenplay for the tv adaptation of it.

Anyway, there is a particular scene in which Adam, has arranged to meet his rather difficult mother for dinner to apologise for rather clumsily introducing the man he lives with to her the previous evening at the theatre. Until then he had never really spoken to her about the nature of this relationship. The exchange goes like this:

‘Mother, I live with Harry and we only have one bedroom.’

‘Do you want a deposit on a bigger flat? Is that what all this is about?’

‘I live with Harry. We love each other and we’re gay.’

‘Both of you?’

A rolling of the eyes.

‘What was wrong with Helen? You were so nice together.’

Families. Parental and other relationships. The scene taps in to some of the complexity of all that these days. Sexuality, identity, convention, generational difference, they’re all there. And the interesting thing too is that I’m pretty sure none of this is in the book. For the tv drama Adam Kay has felt the need to weave in to his story some of the emotional background to the more work-focussed narrative of his book.

The gospels are a bit like that. They’re focused mainly on Jesus’ ministry, his ‘work’ if you like and only in passing on the nature of his personal relationships with others. His relationship with his heavenly Father, of course, is the prime focus. But even so we do learn something of his emotional hinterland, not least his relationship with his mother.

Apart from the birth narratives, part of which we've had this morning, Luke gives us the incident of the family visit to Jerusalem for Passover when Jesus is twelve. He tells us of his being accidentally left behind on their return to Nazareth, the anxiety and the reprimand Mary gives him for making them so worried, and his reply when they eventually find him in the Temple, 'Didn't you know I was bound to be in my Father's house?'

John in his gospel takes us with Mary, Jesus and his friends to a wedding in Cana where they run out of wine. There is a robust exchange between mother and son as she says to him,

'There's no wine left.'

'What's that got to do with me?'

One imagines a rolling of Mary's eyes.

'Just do what he says', she tells the MC. And the water becomes wine as Jesus' commands are carried out.

It's John too who gives us the touching moment at the crucifixion when Jesus commends the beloved disciple into Mary's care and her into the disciple's care. Here are the hints of mutual relationship when at the point of death Jesus' love for her and his friend is given tender practical expression.

Tradition has it that Luke was the first to give a picture of Mary in the form of a representation of her relationship with Jesus. So Luke is traditionally known as the first icon-writer.

However that may be, the tradition of icons certainly has its roots in the East, and has become embedded in the Orthodox Christian tradition. They speak of icon writers, not painters, because the icon tells a story about relationship, written in the lines the eye follows as the icon is contemplated.

Let's look at one. Here is the icon of Tikhvinskaya, after the Russian Orthodox monastery where it is now kept. It's a particular style of icon called *Hodegetria*, a Greek word meaning pointing the way. You can see why: Mary is looking directly at us while cradling her baby in the crook of her left arm. But the gesture of her right

hand is pointing us towards Jesus and when our eye follows the line between her hand and his face we notice that he is looking up towards his mother.

*the icon can be viewed here:*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theotokos\\_of\\_Tikhvin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theotokos_of_Tikhvin)

What's the storyline here? Well it might be something like this.

Mary, the mother, looks out at us and engages our attention, as one human being to another and having drawn us in our eye moves naturally to her gesture, her nose in line with her thumb takes our gaze downwards. Her hand is pointing us towards the baby she holds in her arms and the fingers lead us naturally back up towards his face. This face doesn't look out at us but turns towards his mother's, whilst his hand makes the Orthodox sign of blessing. He blesses her - and us too. In his other hand he holds his life - the gospel scroll.

The storyline seems then to speak about a circular relationship of love. It's a little journey of relationship. This is not a portrait of Mary alone, it's the story of her relationship with her son and ours with them both as she draws us into the intimate circle. She looks out invitingly to us whilst Jesus is completely absorbed in her. As Rowan Williams (to whom I'm indebted for these thoughts in his marvellous book *Ponder these Things*) says,

*'It is not only that we cannot understand Mary without seeing her as pointing to Christ: we cannot understand Christ without seeing his attention to Mary. Jesus does not appear to us as a solitary monarch, enthroned far off, but as someone whose being and living is always engaged, already directed towards humanity.'* (p7)

The icon is the opposite of the modern 'selfie' with its obsession with me: me at the Tower of London; me with my friends having a good time; me at the top of Mont Blanc; me swimming in Thailand etc. As well as pointing away from me it also points away from obsessions with things, with wealth, with my job, with how well I'm doing, with how I measure up to what other people are like or the standards the world sets.

It tells us something too about another modern obsession: identity.

Mary points away from herself and towards Jesus because her identity is to be found in him. He is the explanation and purpose of her life. You can only really know Mary if you understand who she truly is - the mother of Jesus, the God-bearer because of her 'yes' to God's messenger, Gabriel, when he tells her she's going to have a child. Her identity is found in that child. St Paul realises this is true of all Christians. We are 'in Christ', part of him and who he is. We live because we are loved by him, for no other reason. Our whole life, its purpose and its meaning can only truly be found by looking at him - and reading the gospels which he holds.

And then, like Mary, we shall be able to point others to Christ so that they too can find out who they really are and what their life is about - love in relationship. The way to life is the path away from self-contemplation and self-presentation and towards Jesus who in turn reflects us back to others. So we come to the understanding that we find who we are in relation only to Christ and to other people. I am who I am because of him, but also because of you. His love makes me who I am but so does yours.

Reflecting this truth John Donne will famously say, 'No man is an island entire of itself...Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind'

So Mary in this icon shows her longing to engage us in this circle of love, to find ourselves as found in him. It's a dynamic call; there's no sense of finding and standing still, the truth is to be found in the constant renewal of the circle, gradually revealing more about ourselves and Christ.

So this is the image to keep before us as we move closer towards Christ's Passion and death and as we look in sorrow not only at ourselves but also at the world we live in and see the image of God's love for us in Christ so marred as to be sometimes unrecognisable. This icon points us away from all that to be the reminder of the amazing circle of love God longs to create for all that he has made - and its redemption through Christ. Here things earthly and heavenly are joined in human relationship. Jesus, who lived and suffered and died as we do, is always lovingly engaged with us - all of us, both people we like and people we don't.

Here, says Mary, the Mother of God, here is the way to be, here is the way to life, here is the key to who you are as she points us to her son. Come and be with us.