

Sermon Sunday 27th July 2008

Margaret Mahy has written a couple of children's books about grandmothers. One of them is called "The man whose grandmother was a pirate" which conjures the image of a grandmother with eye patch and cutlass ready to do battle on the high seas. The other book is called, "A Busy Day for a Good Grandmother." This one has Grandma jumping and skating over a variety of obstacles to get to her Piper Cherokee aircraft. She is carrying her precious cargo of Grandma's homemade honeycakes which have to be delivered to her son who has a crying baby who doesn't sleep unless he has grandma's special food. This food is so desirable that even while flying she is not safe. High over mountain peaks she comes under constant attack from aerial vultures doing anything and everything to down the plane and capture its precious cargo of grandma's delicious food. Finally she arrives and straightaway baby settles and her son is highly relieved. Whereupon the busy grandmother makes the risky return journey home, another adventure completed successfully.

Today we celebrate St Anne, the mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary and, most important of all, the grandmother of Jesus. It may be that St Anne's life was as demanding and as exciting as Margaret Mahy's story book character. As I have mentioned in the pew news today, however, we will never really know. Nothing about Anne is reported in the New Testament, and the stories we do have amount to pious legends based on a factual basis which is dubious to say the least. The reason we remember Anne is not so much because of her outstanding example in juggling all the things grandmothers have to cope with. We remember her because of what her story tells us about Jesus, that the earthly Jesus was a real human being born into a real family of real flesh and blood, with a human mother, real grandparents and brothers and sisters, just like the rest of us.

The faithfulness of Mary made the incarnation possible, the story of which was related to us in the gospel before us today. We do well to ponder the "yes" of Mary to God in response to the message of the angel. Mary was an unmarried mother, possibly even a teenage mother, although we are not told her age.



The Virgin and Child with St Anne
by Leonardo Da Vinci

Can you imagine being St Anne, and having your daughter come home and telling you she is pregnant? Like most parents St Anne would have asked about the father. On hearing a story about an angel and the Holy Spirit a likely response from St Anne was, “Yeah right! – where’s that Joseph got to?” Whether or not she was aware of it at the time, Mary’s “yes” to God was a huge risk. Under the Law of Moses Joseph’s family had the right to seek the death sentence for Mary – usually by stoning. Do you think St Anne would have gone wild over this? Certainly the village gossips would have had a field day. All we know is that Mary said, “Yes” to God. “Be it unto me according to thy word.” The reason Mary was able to say that “yes” so clearly and confidently is because of the support and encouragement of her mother; herself a faithful and prayerful Jewish grandmother, sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

But the trials faced by Mary and Joseph were only just beginning. Remember the prophecies of Anna and Simeon in the temple about Jesus being the one to restore Israel and the warning that the destiny of this child would pierce Mary’s heart. And the time when the 12 year old Jesus a pilgrim with his family. They went together as family to the temple for the feast. But as we know Jesus stayed in the temple listening to the spiritual leaders teaching about God. He was lost for three days. His parents were in a state of blind panic trying to find him. In the face of the challenges and responsibilities of parenthood, the dire predictions of the future, and the daily grind of subsistence living in first century Palestine, Mary’s “yes” to God continued to be a clear and faithful “yes”. Undoubtedly, St Anne was a quiet and prayerful presence, feeling the tensions, frequent baby sitter, child minder, producer of grandma’s special dinners, all the while watching and praying while the story continued to unfold.



St Anne With The Virgin And Child 1519
by Albrecht Durer

St Anne probably faced all the alarm that Mary felt when Jesus began his public ministry. Why did Jesus have to challenge the authorities so much? Why bring shame on the good name of the family? Goodness me, in Nazareth Jesus was nearly thrown off a cliff after his first sermon in the synagogue at home in Nazareth. Mary even tried to retrieve Jesus from the crowds one day and bring him home. But Jesus had the temerity to lecture his mother about his faithful followers being his family – his brother and sister and mother.

But even through all that, Mary's "yes" to God continued to be a firm "yes" to God. Could it be that Mary's faithfulness was because Jesus' grandmother could see what was happening? Perhaps St Anne was praying for her daughter and standing with her in being the mother of Jesus, enabling Mary to remain faithful to God and her son, taking her part in presenting Christ to the world.

If she was still young and agile enough, St Anne may well have been one of the women who watched on while Jesus was nailed to a cross. As Simeon foretold when Jesus was still a child, a sword pierced Mary's soul as she watched her own son dying on a cross. Undoubtedly St Anne, if she were still alive, would have been feeling for both Mary and Jesus as they faced unimaginable terror. Perhaps Mary wondered why Jesus embarked on a project of caring for the poor and clearing the temple and confronting the religious authorities. Yet, through the failure and defeat, Mary's "yes" to God never wavered.

Finally Mary is present when the risen Jesus appears in the Upper Room. Is not her heart burning within her as the scriptures are opened by the risen Christ? Is she not one of these who recognise him in the breaking of bread? Is Mary not present in the Upper Room, watching and praying and listening to God when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the Day of Pentecost? Was St Anne one of the first to hear the Good News? Was she there when the Holy Spirit was poured out? We may never know for sure. What we do know is that Mary's "yes" to God continued to be a firm "yes". It is a quiet trusting in the good purposes of God, even when the cause seems hopeless and all the evidence seems to be to the contrary. Mary knows that God is a God who is utterly trustworthy so that eventually she could pray: "Lord, be it unto me according to your word."

In the theory of faith development, the earliest images of God that develop within us as infants comes from our parents, most likely our mothers. Mary's conviction that God is utterly trustworthy might well have been passed on to her by St Anne. St Anne, the grandmother of Jesus might well have been a biblical version of Margaret Mahy's good grandmother: constant in prayer, an encourager, a provider of honey cakes. May we be encouraged by the example of St Anne and St Mary so that we too can make our "yes" to God a firm "yes" and in an attitude of complete trust say with Mary, "Yes, Lord. Be it unto me according to your word."



St Anne Consoled by a Woman 1544 1545 by Gaudenzio Ferrari