

Holy Tuesday: Daughters of Jerusalem

Luke 23.26-31

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'

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One of the lesser-known martyrs of the Second World War is Maria Skobtsova. Born in Russia (now Latvia) in 1891, she came to Paris in 1923 as a political refugee from the Russian Revolution and became a leading social activist among the poor of that city. After the fall of France in 1940, she used her large house to hide, feed and take care of hundreds of Jews and, when discovered, was sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. On Good Friday 1945, she was selected – or possibly volunteered in the place of another prisoner – for execution in the newly-constructed gas chamber, where she was killed on Holy Saturday.

As we reflect on the role of the daughters of Jerusalem this evening, it's to Skobtsova's family life and her theological writing, however, that we will turn. Christ addresses this group of women, who mourn him as he makes his way to the cross, as 'daughters'. In doing so, he is identifying them as the true inheritors of the faith of Abraham. But it's clear from his reference to their children, that they are mothers too. That identity is significant: throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus shows particular concern not just for women but for mothers and since his own mother Mary is not mentioned in Luke's passion narrative (though I think we can assume she was among them), this group of women becomes *the* maternal presence at the crucifixion of the Son of God.

Skobtsova was painfully acquainted with the experience of bereavement. All three of her children predeceased her. Her second daughter Anastasia died of meningitis

aged five; her first daughter Gaiana died suddenly in her 20s (possibly due to a heart attack) and her son, Yuri, who helped shelter Jews at their house during the war, was killed at Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944. But rather than diminish her spirit, the deaths of her children enlarged it. After Anastasia's death, Skobtsova wrote that she became "aware of a new and special, broad and all-embracing motherhood ... [I saw a] new road before me and a new meaning in life, to be a mother for all, for all who need maternal care, assistance, or protection. ... However hard I try, I find it impossible to construct anything greater than these three words, 'Love one another'."

Her theological writing connects these experiences of motherhood, suffering and love. In particular, she proposes that if we are to really understand the Christian call to love one another, then we must understand its closest equivalent, which is the relationship between a mother and a child. We are accustomed, Skobtsova observed, to hearing Christ's command to love as a duty which requires effort to fulfil, but she interprets this command rather as an inescapable condition of life in the body of Christ. Consider that the love of a mother for a child is not a chosen policy of personal behaviour; it is an inevitable commitment – to be with them, to experience what they experience, to suffer alongside them. Recall the words of Simeon to Mary when the infant Christ is presented in the Temple: 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2.35) In a similar way, Skobtsova declares that all who call themselves disciples of Christ are unavoidably bound together as loving 'co-sufferers'.

This bond between Christians – which is, if fully realised, a bond between all human beings, even all creatures – is the outcome of Christ's death. On the cross, Christ takes on human pain and suffering, so that no wound can be sustained by any person that is not already united to his wounds. But it's not only that Christ has taken on our pain; he also binds his disciples into his pain. Consider Simon of Cyrene, who becomes a disciple of Christ by literally taking up his cross and following Jesus – but note that the cross he carries is not actually his own; it is Christ's. Simon is yoked into God's pain and fate.

The daughters of Jerusalem reveal that the bond of love exists not only between Christ and an individual disciple but between the disciples themselves. They beat their breasts and wail for Jesus as if he is their child – an occurrence foreshadowed with staggering prescience by the prophet Zechariah, from which we hear a reading

during Compline. But Jesus diverts their care from himself to one another, as if, to God, their love for one another is the same as their love for him. It's a similar idea to that found in the Gospel of John, when Jesus on the cross says to his mother and the beloved disciple: "Here is your son. ... Here is your mother." (19.26-7). But in Luke's Gospel, the fact that the maternal presence is a *group* of women – many, presumably, completely unrelated to Jesus by one kind of blood – underlines that the blood of Christ's death creates a new kind of family.

In Skobtsova's writing, these bonds between love of God, love of neighbour and the suffering of both, are encapsulated in the notion of the 'body of Christ'. That body is both the pierced flesh and aching bones of Jesus on the cross and the spiritual reality of the varied membership of the church. Skobtsova sees that motherhood is essential to both. Just as Mary gave birth to the physical body of Jesus, so the spiritual body of Christ exists in our maternal love for one another – that love which is an unavoidable commitment of care.

Last week I spent a few days at a convent. And as I pondered the daughters of Jerusalem and some of Maria Skobtsova's writing, I realised that the community of women whose guest I was were living examples of the kind of love into which the cross of Christ binds us. Having taken life-long vows to stay together under one roof, and with Christ at the centre of their daily worship, they have embraced their inescapable involvement with each other, and, as many of the community grow frail and vulnerable in their old age, so too they have no choice but to share one another's pain. Their common life is in striking contrast to the town around them, where many people reside in very large detached houses whose high hedges and security gates keep their occupants well protected from the outside world. For all I know, they are thoroughly decent people, but the architecture is entirely antithetical to the idea of common suffering. It speaks of our desire to deny our responsibilities for others, to turn a blind eye to their needs, and to focus only on ourselves. In other words, it's a physical representation of sin. But perhaps it is even more than that – because if the life we share in the body of Christ and even our life as God's creatures comprises non-negotiable solidarity with others, then to deny that solidarity is not only sinful but also a kind of suicide. To reject the unavoidable is death.

Skobtsova writes about how death does not foreshorten love but expands it, both in the sense that our love for the person who has died now extends into another reality and in that it can inspire greater love for those still living. This is one way that the

cross enables the victory of love over death. But she also provides practical guidance about how the binding love in the body of Christ may be intentionally nurtured and expanded. On the one hand, it is a matter of continually questioning our instinct for self-protection – the desire to install security gates at the entrance of our hearts. On the other hand, it is about using our imaginations to allow an instinct of love to take root.

It all comes from our contemplation of the suffering of Christ. Since it is common to all people, suffering is the door through which we can enter into anyone else's experience, while other parts of their lives may remain strange to us. Moreover, suffering reveals our unavoidable solidarity with one another because when we are confronted by the pain of another person, we can only turn away by lying to ourselves and to them about how we are not *really* members of the same body. That means that if we can put our alibis aside, the experience of the suffering of another person is the principal means by which our egos and agendas are displaced.

Of course, many people are capable of accepting this kind of bond when it comes to particular individuals. We are well practiced at recognising our solidarity with our families and friends and in general the people we like. However, if we accept this bond of suffering firstly in relation to particular people with whom we have some other pre-existing affinity, there is no reason why that bond should extend to anyone else. Only in Christ, to whom the whole of humanity and all creatures are united by virtue of his incarnation, are we told that any love we give cannot but be given to every person and every creature. This is the reason that Jesus must be the first person to whose experience of pain we open our hearts and discover that we cannot turn away. He must become our child, and then will everyone become our child.

From the outside you would be forgiven for supposing that the bond of Christian love is a kind of opioid that enables us to tolerate this cruel world a little better, though is incapable of transforming it. Administering painkillers was, incidentally, something probably done by women in Jesus' time for those who were about to suffer painful deaths. However, as anyone will tell you who has received this kind of love, it is not merely a drug but a truly liberating relationship. Why? Because it is a manifestation of the body of Christ, through which, like blood, flows the life-giving love of God, and which not only suffers but radiates with the glory of resurrection.