

A Homily preached by  
The Rev'd Jo Popham

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent  
February 24, 2013  
"Jesus, our true mother, opens his arms like a hen protecting her chicks"  
Luke 13:31-35

We are so blessed by the richness of our worship services. But how do we make changes in our liturgy? On Ash Wednesday I addressed our need for change. As an example of change I shared some light bulb jokes you likely have heard about how many Anglicans it takes to change a lightbulb. A thoughtful theological answer from a very traditional Anglican might be "None. The old light bulb is complete and sufficient unto itself and should not be changed according to the world's whims." If that were so, Thomas Cranmer's beautiful words would never have been embraced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Cranmer's intent was to use the vernacular of the times -- the language of the common people -- hence the *Book of Common Prayer*. I am not so sure that he would be pleased that we have not always adapted the language of liturgy to our own times. [But there are many who would never think of changing how we worship to conform to the whims of the world.]

How often do we use scripture verses to justify our individual worldviews, but just as often we ignore those other verses that are counter to our personal beliefs. Today inclusive language is accepted more and more by the church. [The ancient language in our *Book of Common Prayer* was authorized again in 1962 here in Canada. But we also have the *Book of Alternative Services* that also was authorized in 1985. Additionally, we have authorized supplemental services with a more modern expression of worship. In England the Book of Common Prayer authorized in 1662 still is the official liturgy. Parliament must act to change England's authorized version of liturgies, and there is less chance of there being a consensus on language for all the Church of England in this modern era. Recently the Church in England adopted a new prayer book of worship called *Common Worship*, but it is not technically authorized, although it is being used consistently. Our Eucharistic Prayer this week comes from *Common Worship*.] But we

still have our traditional liturgies to fall back on when we want to recall our beautiful heritage.

At the end of the day I often read Compline. And two of my favorite lines in all our worship services are from Compline:

Keep us, O Lord, as the apple of your eye;  
*Hide us under the shadow of your wings.*

God, hide us under the shadow of your wings. Can we describe God as a mother bird who can protect us by enfolding us –hiding us – under the shadow of her wings of love? Have we ever wanted to hide under the protection of God’s “wings?” I certainly have.

In the 34<sup>th</sup> verse of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke’s gospel we hear Jesus calling himself a mother hen.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Well, now, how can the Son of God be compared to a hen who gathers her young under her wings? Many of us grew up with only the image of God as Father. But really God does not have gender. Jesus does have gender. Jesus is male. Yet he calls himself a brood hen wanting to gather up the children of Jerusalem to care for them – to love them.

In Matthew Jesus said the same thing (23:37):

‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

I am not just cherry-picking offering the alternative feminine image of God. I am not trying to merely be inclusive. I grew up in a time when all references to God were male, and I never felt excluded – until I went to seminary. I had experienced – albeit second hand – the pain that many women who all their lives had felt that the message of the Bible did not apply to them. But then I was blessed to teach the 1<sup>st</sup> communion classes at a very large Episcopal parish where that year the majority of 2<sup>nd</sup> graders were girls.

Children these days are much more likely to question new ideas and images. And these little girls expressed what no one of my generation would have dared. They wondered why there were so few women in Bible stories, even though I was careful to make reference to the women in Scripture. But they were quick to point out that those women were not as important as the men and boys in the Bible stories. Of course I knew that God would not have anyone excluded from being cared for or sheltered or loved. But I learned from those precious little ones that they did feel excluded. So, even if I didn't see the male-centric language as a barrier, even if my mind heard humankind wherever mankind was used in the Bible and in our liturgy, from that moment on I would be as inclusive as possible, so that all people could be receptive to the Word of God.

And so, reading Jesus's words to the people of Jerusalem:

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings (Luke 13:34)

is very comforting to this late-blooming feminist. Yes, I am a convert to feminism. Many of my male peers in ministry are better feminists than I. But I know that were the church to have remained as it was in my youth in the 1960s I would not be standing here as your priest. Nor would [Grace or] Pat be able to be a lay reader, or a woman lead the Prayers of the People or be a server. Nor would the reading about Jesus being a mothering hen be included in the lectionary. It was never read in church when I was a child.

My sisters and brothers, Jesus wanted not only to redeem all God's people but also to mother, to protect and nurture them – and us. Jesus wanted to care for Jerusalem as a mother hen who draws her young under her wings when danger threatens. If we really look, images of God being a bird mothering her young abound in the Bible. God's people were sustained and shielded

As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings

as the Old Testament reads in Deuteronomy (32:11).

As Ruth's benefactor Boaz told her when speaking of Ruth's faithfulness to her mother-

in-law Naomi:

May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge reward you for your deeds!”(Ruth 2:12)

God is like a mother bird who offers refuge to her young.

The Prophet Isaiah likened God’s protection of Jerusalem to that of

birds hovering overhead to protect and deliver... to spare and rescue” (Isaiah 31:5).

In Psalm 36 God’s people

may take refuge in the shadow of your wings (v. 7).

And in Psalm 91 we are assured that we may find refuge under God’s wings

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.’

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;

he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler (vs. 1-4).

Although God here is expressed as the He who portrays the feminine faithfulness to shield us with loving wings (v. 4). The same theme is expressed in a hymn we all love.

Paul – along with Silvanus, and Timothy – spoke of his feminine ministry to the people of Thessalonica saying:

[W]e were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

Paul also spoke to the Galatians as little children

[F]or whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4:19).

[Interestingly, the readings for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent in the BCP refer not to this verse where Paul refers to himself as a mother who forms her children’s faith, but a later verse where Paul refers to Jerusalem as the mother of us all, so that Hagar’s child should be cast out along with her son so that Isaac, the son of free Jerusalem could be the true heir

And so we are free because we are not from the bondswoman Hagar, but of free Jerusalem (Galatians 4:24–31).

I don't know about you, but having this as my model of motherhood does not make me particularly proud. I would rather have the model of God being my mother, of Christ being a brooder hen protecting us, of Paul being in labour to produce faithful people on Mothering Sunday.]

Julian of Norwich wrote a lovely piece of poetry that portrays Christ as the one

who came in our poor flesh to share a mother's care. Our mothers bear us for pain and for death, our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase Jesus...our true Mother" is derived from St. Anselm's Prayer #10 to St. Paul which translated by Dr. Eleanor McLaughlin reads:

But you O Jesus, good teacher, are you not also a mother, are you not that mother who as a mother hen gathers under her wings, her chickens? Truly Lord, you are also a mother because what others have conceived and given birth to they have received from you.<sup>2</sup>

St. Anselm's image came from St. Augustine who wrote of Psalm 101:

Christ exercises fatherly authority and maternal love.

What a wonderful image from one of the patristic fathers!

St. Bernard of Clairvaux purportedly told a struggling novice,

[The Crucified] will be your mother, and you will be his son.

The danger to the community of 1<sup>st</sup> century believers indeed was real, and Jesus was sent to gather them together as a mother gathers her young to herself. Could there be a more tender image to describe God's love than a mother? What threatens to take over the community of God these days? Metaphorically speaking, who might the fox of our day be? Does God still extend to us shelter and protection and care as loving as a mother hen would offer? Yes! Oh, yes!

The Holy Spirit – often expressed in the feminine – brooded over the waters of creation. And we are the crowning glory of God’s creation. God’s love is steadfast. God’s love is forever. Through Jesus’s love on the cross, we still have that offer of love. We are just as loved as the people of Jerusalem. But, don’t we too turn away from that love as God’s people did in Jesus’s time? Jesus so wanted to teach the people of his time the love of God. He wanted to enfold them in his loving protective wings. Jerusalem was not willing. Are we? Without a mother hen in Jerusalem the chicks were scattered when the fox got into the henhouse, and Jesus could no longer shelter them. Even his disciples ran and hid, while the women and his mother waited at the foot of the cross. How she must have wanted to enfold him in the safety of her wings.

What mother would not want to protect her brood from a hungry fox? Have you ever loved someone you could not protect? I dare say every mother has been in this position, and fathers too. All we parents can do is open our arms. We cannot force our children into the protection of our wings.

In the end, Jesus did care for God’s people as a mother hen. He redeemed us all. He taught us the most radical love of all – God’s love – by his redemptive work on Calvary. On the cross Jesus was totally exposed, totally vulnerable, willing to sacrifice himself – with his wings open wide for Jerusalem, for his disciples, for us, for all his chicks who had been scattered and still are scattered.

Jesus still is with us. His arms are open wide offering us protection and love. May we allow Jesus, our true mother, to enfold us in God’s love.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> A Song of the True Motherhood by Julian of Norwich

God chose to be our mother in all things \* and so made the foundation of his work, most humbly and most pure, in the Virgin's womb.

God, the perfect wisdom of all, \* arrayed himself in this humble place.

Christ came in our poor flesh \* to share a mother's care.

Our mothers bear us for pain and for death; \* our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.

Christ carried us within him in love and travail, \* until the full time of his passion.

And when all was completed and he had carried us so for joy, \* still all this could not satisfy the power of his wonderful love.

All that we owe is redeemed in truly loving God, \* for the love of Christ works in us;

Christ is the one whom we love.

<sup>2</sup> O St Paul, where is he that was called

the nurse of the faithful, caressing his sons?

Who is that affectionate mother who declares everywhere that she is in labour for her sons?

Sweet nurse, sweet mother,

who are the sons you are in labour with, and nurse,

but those whom by teaching the faith of Christ

you bear and instruct?

Or who is a Christian after your teaching

who is not born into the faith and established in it by you?

And if in that blessed faith we are born

And nursed by other apostles also,

it is most of all by you,

for you have laboured and done more than them all in this;

so if they are our mothers, you are our greatest mother.

...

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?

Are you not the mother who, like a hen,

gathers her chickens under her wings?

Truly, Lord, you are a mother;

for both they who are in labour

and they who are brought forth

are accepted by you.

You have died more than they, that they may labour to bear.

It is by your death that they have been born,

for if you had not been in labour,

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you could not have borne death;  
and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth.  
For, longing to bear sons into life,  
you tasted of death,  
and by dying you begot them.  
You did this in your own self,  
your servants, by your commands and help.  
You as the author, they as the ministers.  
So you, Lord God, are the great mother.

Then both of you are mothers.  
Even if you are fathers, you are also mothers.  
For you have brought it about that those born to death  
should be reborn to life -  
you by your own act, you by his power.  
Therefore you are fathers by your effect  
and mothers by your affection.  
Fathers by your authority, mothers by your kindness.  
Fathers by your teaching, mothers by your mercy.  
Then you, Lord, are a mother  
and you, Paul, are a mother too...

And you, my soul, dead in yourself,  
run under the wings of Jesus your mother  
and lament your griefs under his feathers.  
Ask that your wounds may be healed  
and that, comforted, you may live again.

Christ, my mother,  
you gather your chickens under your wings;  
this dead chicken of yours puts himself under those wings.  
For by your gentleness the badly frightened are comforted,  
by your sweet smell the despairing are revived,  
your warmth gives life to the dead,  
your touch justifies sinners.  
Mother, know again your dead son,  
both by the sign of your cross and the voice of his confession.  
Warm your chicken, give life to your dead man, justify your sinner.  
Let your terrified one be consoled by you;  
despairing of himself, let him be comforted by you.



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and in your whole and unceasing grace  
let him be refashioned by you.  
For from you flows consolation for sinners;  
to you the blessing for ages and ages. Amen.