

Honoré de Balzac said: ‘The heart of a mother is a deep abyss at the bottom of which you will always find forgiveness.’

The two mothers in today’s Bible readings both had hearts which were deep abysses, at the bottom of which was immense courage.

Hannah, in our reading from the Old Testament, was desperate for a child of her own. She pleaded with God for help, and when baby Samuel was born after so many years, Hannah must have been over the moon. Yet she’d promised, if she ever had a child, to give her first-born son into God’s service. As soon as tiny Samuel was weaned, his mother realized the time had come to make good that promise. And although he was probably only a few years old, Hannah stuck with her decision to give him to God.

I wonder how she could bear to leave her small son behind in the care of Eli, the old priest? Especially as Eli’s own sons hadn’t turned out very well. They were the talk of the town for all their wild ways. How could an elderly male priest replace a mother? Hannah must have been torn apart as she walked home without Samuel. Yet because she had the courage to stay with her decision, to keep her promise to God, her son Samuel grew up to become a great prophet. Happily, we know Hannah visited Samuel once a year, and each year brought him a new cloak which she had made herself. And we know that later Hannah had three more sons and two daughters.

Following in Hannah’s footsteps is Mary, the mother of Jesus. I wonder what it feels like to learn that your son is to be executed? Yet Mary had the courage to stand there at the foot of the cross as her son hung from it. She had the courage to be there for her son when he needed her support, no matter what the cost to herself. Somehow, she found the strength to stick it out, to stand by him in his hour of great need.

10 March 2021

This is both a privilege and a requirement of parenting, of both mothers and fathers, to endure and to go on enduring, no matter what the cost to yourself.

Perhaps it’s reasonably easy to stand alongside your children in their hour of need when they behave properly and grow up into responsible, law-abiding citizens. But I wonder what it’s like when your children don’t turn out to be the sort of people you hoped they’d be?

I suspect it doesn’t make too much difference to a mother whether her child is innocent or guilty. The pain she feels must be beyond imagining, because love goes way beyond concepts of innocence or guilt. Love endures whatever the cost, whatever the pain.

The sort of love God has for us is the sort of fierce, protective love a mother has for her child, only more so. God’s love for us goes beyond the concepts of innocence or guilt. God will be standing there at the foot of our cross, whatever that might be, whether we deserve to be hanging there or not. God will stay alongside us throughout, enduring but not condemning.

And if that’s the sort of love God has for us, then we need to find that sort of love not only for our own children, but for everyone else as well. This means standing alongside other people no matter whether we think they’re innocent or guilty. It means sticking with them no matter what the cost, no matter what the pain.

‘The heart of a mother is a deep abyss at the bottom of which you will always find forgiveness.’ And endurance, and pain, and strength, and above all, love. For the hearts of mothers, at their best, mirror the heart of God.

Amen.