



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Ascension Sunday, Easter VI, May 12th, 2013

Also Being Mothering Sunday

**In the Name of the Father ✠ and of the Son
and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.**

In today's Communion Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that after he has ascended into heaven, he'll send the Holy Spirit to comfort them. In fact, that's what he calls the Holy Spirit: the Comforter. And the word "comfort" happens to be associated with the only two occasions recorded in the Bible where God uses female imagery to describe himself.

It's quite surprising, when you come to think about it: God repeatedly refers to himself as "father, yet he only likens himself to a mother twice – once in the 66th Chapter of Isaiah and again in an incident recorded by St. Matthew and St. Luke.

God's apparent male fixation is completely at odds with our 21st century sense of sexual equality and civil rights. How dare God be such a terrible male chauvinist! He needs to be put straight and who better to do it than feminist scholars who have de-sexed the Bible and given us "gender neutral" and feminized liturgies. God the Father is out and God the Mother is in. No more nasty old Yaweh or Jehovah, her name is Sophia today.

The trouble with this is if God is all he's cracked up to be, he presumably knew what he was doing when he inspired the scriptures to be written. If he genuinely is all-knowing, all wise and omnipotent, it could well be that his constant references to himself as father are

quite deliberate. In which case it is probably not unreasonable to assume he's trying to tell us something important about himself.

If his Biblical revelation is relevant for all time – and not just for those benighted souls who lacked the good fortune to be born in our enlightened times like ours – it might make sense to try to figure out the message he's trying to get across before we take a blue pencil to his Word. Getting things wrong might have dire consequences.

With this in mind, let's take a look at the only two passages in the Bible in which God likens himself to a mother. The first, Isaiah 66:13, reads: "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you . . ." In St Matthew and St. Luke, Jesus laments over the fate that awaits Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children unto me as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings . . ."

One thing we might infer from this is that while God tells us in the Old Testament that he is a spirit and, thus, is neither one sex nor the other, if we wish to picture God in human terms, we'd best be best advised to see him as a father rather than a mother. In other words, his relationship to us is that of father to his children. The corollary is, however, that while

he is in many respects like a father, he is very, very much less like a mother.

Women should in no way take this as a put down. It doesn't imply that God thinks men are superior to women or that he thinks of men more highly than women. If you read the scripture, you'll see God doesn't find much to admire in males of the species. Quite to the contrary, in fact. There is, by contrast, at least one quality women generally possess he esteems highly: And that is a mother's ability to comfort.

One of the most ludicrous politically-correct conceits of our age is that men and women are alike in all respects with the exception of their reproductive organs. To appreciate the folly of such an outlandish notion, we need only to consider the profound differences between the relationship of mothers and fathers with their children.

The bond between mother and child is unique in our experience. Modern social theory notwithstanding, it is the most powerful bond that can exist between two human beings. And this shouldn't be altogether surprising. After all, children are nurtured and protected within their mothers' bodies for the first nine months of their lives.

By contrast, children's relationships with their fathers – though just as necessary for their well-being – is very much different. Children must learn to love their fathers and this by no means always comes easily. Frequently in early childhood, a father is regarded as a rival for mother's affection. I recall being none too pleased at the age of three at the appearance of a mustachioed stranger who greeted me with unpleasantly prickly kiss.

Furthermore, the relationship between father and child -- unlike that between child and mother – is based to a very large degree on approval. Indeed, we frequently we read in biographies of famous (and infamous) people of the difficulties they experienced in gaining their fathers' approval. Approval rarely plays a major role in people's relationships with their mothers.

When the chips are down and folks need a shoulder to cry on -- no matter how terrible the things they might have done – their mothers will generally be the last people to turn them away. Indeed, mothers can usually be relied on to stand by their children even when their fathers, their spouses and even their children have washed their hands of them. In fact, the last person to see some faint element of good in a personification of evil like Adolf Hitler was his mother.

I am not trying to argue that fathers are somehow morally superior to mothers. Far from it. But life would indeed be bleak if there was nobody in this world capable of recognizing that element of good in us that eludes everybody else but our mothers. Indeed, life would be utterly intolerable if we didn't have somebody who loves us the way our mothers usually love us – selflessly, unreservedly and unconditionally.

But it is this unconditional aspect of a mother's love that makes it difficult for God to describe himself in motherly metaphors. God's love for us is perfect, self-sacrificing and totally unreserved, but it is also conditional in a way that mother love isn't. In order to benefit from God's love, we need to avail ourselves of it. We have to respond to him. In order for his freely given forgiveness to take effect, we have to be willing to accept it. In other words, his love is conditional in as much as it depends on our accepting it.

While God's love more closely resembles a mother's love than a father's in its profundity, its conditional nature means it would be misleading for God to use maternal imagery to describe it. Paradoxically, perhaps, a father's conditional type of love provides a more accurate metaphor for describing God's love for us. This is all God is doing when he calls himself our father – employing a metaphor. He is most certainly not anointing fatherhood as in anyway superior to motherhood.

Mother love is as near to perfect as human love can get. Let me wish a very happy and blessed Mother's Day to you all *AMEN*