

**Westgate**

**14 May 2006 (Mother's Day)**

**I John 4:7-21**

**Love is the key..in vision and in practice**

**A reflection by Geoff Wraight**

*God is love. Those who go on living in love go on living in God, and God goes on living in them. In this way, love is being brought to full maturity among us, and it will ensure that on the day of judgment, we can stand with our heads held high. You see, as we and God live in each other, we are becoming what God is, right here in the midst of the world. We will stand with heads held high because those who truly love have nothing to fear. Indeed, perfect love banishes fear.*  
(I John 4:16b-18a Nathan Nettleton)

7:30pm on Saturday nights at our house will find most of the members of my family glued to the telly. Some of you here may also enjoy the BBC comedy drama series called Doc Martin.

Doc Martin is the local GP in the sleepy little seaside hamlet called Portwenn. He is played to perfection by Martin Clunes.

Every episode has him going about his work as a GP very efficiently but with almost no bedside manner whatsoever. In fact, Doctor Martin is an extreme version of a male stereotype. That is, he is extremely logical, focussed, and rational but has an emotional intelligence score of less than 10 on a scale of 200. He is insensitive to the extreme and you feel like yelling at him when yet again he resorts to logic and efficiency and misses the body language and plain messages coming from his friends and patients to notice their feelings and need for human connection. He is always being rude and insensitive but doesn't even seem to be aware he is doing it.

On the other hand, most of the women characters in the series are of varying levels of intelligence and education, but are far higher up on the emotional sensitivity scale. They are strong characters yet able to understand the emotional dimensions of relationships and with unbelievable patience keep giving Doc Martin yet another chance to soften up and learn how to relate at a human level again. The other male characters in the series are a notch better than Doc Martin but still pretty useless when it comes to understanding women and the need to nurture relationships. (Though it must be said, that even Doc Martin has feelings and underneath the curmudgeon on the surface is a man crying out to be loved and to love)

Unfortunately, in reality I have known too many men who are like the stereotype of Doc Martin and seem to have a huge deficiency in relational skills, but who get away with it because they are just men and men aren't good at touchy-feely stuff.

On the other hand, even in the post-women's movement world we still seem to attribute relationship skills, family and social cohesion responsibilities to women or to the feminine.

In Christian tradition we have seen these stereotypes and especially those that emerge out of a patriarchal culture, influence our doctrine of God as Trinity. God the Father is the strong, powerful, but benevolent boss where the Spirit and the Son are seen as the helper types to achieve his purposes. We may not spell this out so clearly but in my earlier experience of the church this was certainly the implication.

Thankfully, the Bible does not stick to these stereotypes. And there are many images and metaphors of God that in both male and female forms point to the relational dimensions of the reality of God.

In other words, to be male or female is to be made fully in God's image and to be made in God's image simply means to be made to be in a relationship of love with God, with other human beings and with the whole creation..

That's why I just love that Brian Wren hymn we just sung, Bring Many Names. It so beautifully and effectively turns the stereotypes on their heads.

Strong mother God, working night and day,  
 Planning all the wonders of creation,  
 Setting each equation, genius at play:  
 Hail and hosanna, strong mother God!

God as our Mother is strong and intelligent and even a genius at maths..

Warm father God, hugging every child,  
 Feeling all the strains of human living,  
 Caring and forgiving till we're reconciled:  
 Hail and hosanna, warm father God!

God as Father is warm and gentle, feeling the pain of others and caring and bringing together.

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,  
 Calmly piercing evil's new disguises,  
 Glad of good surprises, wiser than despair:  
 Hail and hosanna, old, aching God!

God as an old person while aching for the pain of the world is not stuck in the mud but open to new surprises and never giving in to despair (I'm reminded of Llew Evans, Lena Stone, Alan Wright and many other older folk at WG)

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,  
 Seeing all, and fretting at our blindness,  
 Crying out for justice, giving all you have:  
 Hail and hosanna, young, growing God!

God as a young person, is eager and optimistic but challenges the blindness of our complacency and leads the way in energetic cries for justice..

These metaphors point to a God who cannot be tied down to any definition and yet who is the reality that gives hope and perspective to our lives.

And this relational God is the God who in Jesus has given us a Way of Life that can transform both ourselves and the world around us. It is expressed in those words of John that were read earlier..

*God is love. Those who go on living in love go on living in God, and God goes on living in them. In this way, love is being brought to full maturity among us, and it will ensure that on the day of judgment, we can stand with our heads held high. You see, as we and God live in each other, we are*

*becoming what God is, right here in the midst of the world. We will stand with heads held high because those who truly love have nothing to fear. Indeed, perfect love banishes fear. (I John 4:16b-18a Nathan Nettleton)*

This is another way of expressing faith as vision, a way of seeing the whole of reality. We have been talking about this idea of faith in our Wed night group. Faith is not just believing a set of doctrines and statements about God and Jesus – it is a way of seeing reality as life-giving and nourishing. A way of seeing God’s love being the ultimate reality that is reaching out to us to transform and give hope.

As Marcus Borg puts it, “this way of seeing the whole makes possible a different response to life. It leads to radical trust. It frees us from the anxiety, self-preoccupation, and concern to protect the self with systems of security.... It leads to the self-forgetfulness of faith and trust to the ability to love and to be present to the moment. It generates a “willingness to spend and be spent” for the sake of a vision that goes beyond ourselves.”

This is no air-fairy love, nor is it just about being nice to other people. This is powerful challenge to live in a radically different way that the current culture preoccupied with fear and security.

It is a vision of love that has sustained many great people of faith in the past.

Champions of non-violence and giants of forgiveness yet strong resistance to injustice such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela come to mind.

But today is Mother’s Day, and I would like to finish by sharing a little of the story of the founder of Mother’s Day – Julia Ward Howe. And as you will see it was not just about flowers and chocolates on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in May..

### **Julia Ward Howe (May 27, 1819 - October 17, 1910)**

Julia Ward Howe was born on May 21, 1819. She is probably best known today as the writer of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. She was married to Samuel Gridley Howe, educator of the blind, who was also active in abolitionism and other reforms. Julia Ward Howe published poetry, plays and travel books, as well as many articles. She became active in the women's rights movement later in life, playing a prominent role in several suffrage organizations and in women's clubs.

Julia Ward Howe's accomplishments did not end with the writing of her famous poem, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." As Julia became more famous, she was asked to speak publicly more often. She saw some of the worst effects of the U.S. Civil War -- not only the death and disease which killed and maimed the soldiers. She worked with the widows and orphans of soldiers on both sides of the war, and realized that the effects of war go beyond the killing of soldiers in battle. She also saw the economic devastation of the Civil War, the economic crises that followed the war, the restructuring of the economies of both North and South.

In 1870, Julia Ward Howe took on a new issue and a new cause. Distressed by her experience of the realities of war, determined that peace was one of the two most important causes of the world (the other being equality in its many forms) and seeing war arise again in the world in the Franco-Prussian War, she called in 1870 for women to rise up and oppose war in all its forms. She wanted women to come together across national lines, to recognize what we hold in common above what divides us, and commit to finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts. She issued a Declaration, hoping to gather together women in a congress of action. It reads like a manifesto for peace that is just as relevant now as it was then..

### **Mother's Day Proclamation - 1870**

by Julia Ward Howe

Arise then...women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts!

Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

"We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,

Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,

For caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn

All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.

We, the women of one country,

Will be too tender of those of another country

To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

From the voice of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with

Our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm!

The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."

Blood does not wipe our dishonour,

Nor violence indicate possession.

As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil

At the summons of war,

Let women now leave all that may be left of home

For a great and earnest day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.

Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means

Whereby the great human family can live in peace...

Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,

But of God -

In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask

That a general congress of women without limit of nationality,

May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient

And the earliest period consistent with its objects,

To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,

The amicable settlement of international questions,

The great and general interests of peace.

Julia failed in her attempt to get formal recognition of a Mother's Day for Peace but her idea seeded further action and influenced Anna Jarvis, a young Appalachian homemaker who had attempted starting in 1858 to improve sanitation what she called Mothers' Work Days. She organized women throughout the Civil War to work for better sanitary conditions for both sides, and in 1868 she began work to reconcile Union and Confederate neighbours.

Anna Jarvis' daughter, also named Anna Jarvis, would of course have known of her mother's work, and the work of Julia Ward Howe. Much later, when her mother died, this second Anna Jarvis started her own crusade to found a memorial day for women. The first such Mother's Day was celebrated in West Virginia in 1907 in the church where the elder Anna Jarvis had taught Sunday School. And from there the custom caught on — spreading eventually to 45 states. Finally the holiday was declared officially by states beginning in 1912, and in 1914 the President, Woodrow Wilson, declared the first U.S. national Mother's Day.

So the original motivation behind mothers day was some strong women standing up for a better world and for peace. They were motivated and sustained by a different vision – a vision of love.

As we give thanks for the women who have nurtured us and raised us today let us not forget the centrality of love and the vision of faith that we each called to – men and women – that has the power to sustain and transform us as practice living in that love, working for peace and trusting the God of love for a future free of fear.

Amen.