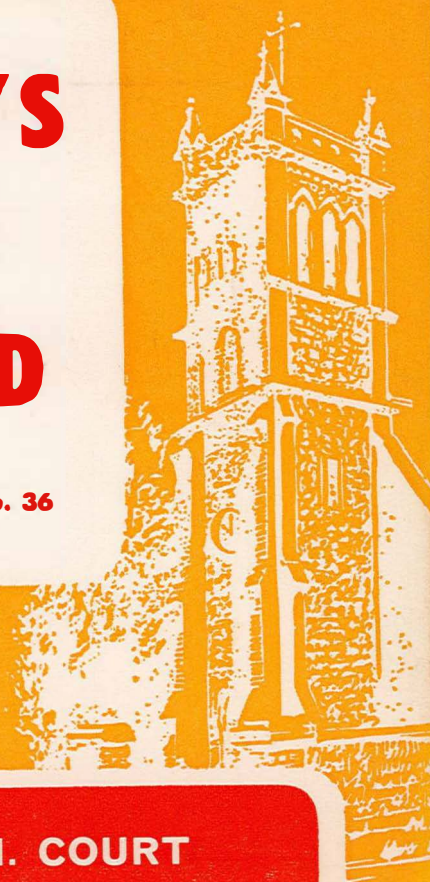


MUM'S THE WORD

Trinity Sermon No. 36

JOHN H. COURT



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by JOHN H. COURT, Ph.D

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MUM'S THE WORD

Being a mother remains something unique. There are few women who do not in their earlier years long to become mothers, even though I understand some who bring up several children develop a rather jaded view of the joys of motherhood.

It is one of the more remarkable features of God's creation that without training, both animal and human mothers do such a good job in providing for their offspring. Within the animal kingdom it would appear that mothers generally do a good job of providing for their young, even when the fathers do not stay around. There are, of course, exceptions where mothers may kill their young, but on the other hand there are also impressive stories of mother birds sacrificing themselves to save their young.

Human mothers, too, when they follow their inner sense of what is appropriate, generally do a fine job. Those who turn to Benjamin Spock's famous book "Baby and Child Care" will find that whatever they do is likely to be the right thing - not surprisingly the book has been a best seller as several generations of mothers have sought

reassurance.

We ought therefore to be dismayed at the signs in recent years that mothers are finding their task increasingly frustrating and difficult.

We find in Australia that women are attempting suicide twice as often as they did a few years ago. Many say that our major drug problem at present is found among middle-aged women taking tranquillisers and analgesics by the handful. Such are the indications of a helpless despair bottled-up inside. We also see signs of frustration being expressed outwardly. How else can we explain 60,000 battered babies in America last year? That's a big country you say - a comparable rate for South Australia would be about 1 per day at the Children's Hospital. I believe we actually have nearer to one a fortnight, but the numbers are rising. Shall we soon catch up, or will we take the needs of mothers seriously? Our children chose a Mothers Day card which read "A recent survey found that 83% of mothers are overworked. The other 17% were too busy to respond."

Some people with all the answers talk of doing away with mothers. We might have supposed biology would be against such an idea and of course there are limits, but it is disconcerting to find what radical alternatives either exist or get suggested.

Any of you who have read Alvin Tofler's "Future Shock" would know of his comments on alternatives to the traditional family. Writing of "The Mystique of Motherhood" he says:

"Advances in Science and technology or in reproductive biology alone, could, within a short time, smash all orthodox ideas about the family and its responsibilities. When babies can be grown in a laboratory jar what happens to the very notion of maternity?"

He goes on to visualise people waiting till they retire before taking on the responsibility of rearing a pre-selected embryo - selecting of course such matters as sex and freedom from handicap rather than waiting to see what may come.

He writes of corporate families of

the commune type with children reared collectively, not relating to any one person as mother. This of course is similar to what exists in kibbutzim in Israel, but there they have already found that mother must continue to play an important part in upbringing. It has been suggested that two homosexuals living together might adopt and bring up children. We may confidently predict the enormous problems that such children would encounter.

But while you may easily reject such suggestions as 'way out', don't forget that in subtle ways we have already moved a long way towards such alternatives.

As I speak of a 'mother' I naturally use the word interchangeably with the word 'wife'. The Biblical pattern is quite clear - a woman first becomes a wife before she becomes a mother. Clearly it is intended that a baby shall not only be biologically sustained by the mother, but that she should continue to provide for his wider needs as he grows. She can only do this fully adequately with the support and guidance provided by a stable relationship with father. Marriage is the means of ensuring this.

But we live in a society where motherhood does not necessitate prior marriage. There have always been those who broke the rules and conceived children outside marriage. Now the very Government itself actually helps. No longer is this breaking the rules, but the Federal Public Servant can receive 12 weeks maternity leave, regardless of marriage. That is, 'illegitimate' has become 'legitimate'.

When divorce is made quick and cheap while promiscuity is given every encouragement; when a combination of easily-available contraception (at half-price to deserted wives) goes with readily-available abortion, we might find ourselves coming to believe that motherhood is an inconvenient and anti-social mistake.

I started by saying mother love is unique. That is, there is no truly satisfactory human substitute. That is not to say that adoptive mothers or grandmothers cannot step in when the mother is absent. These others can certainly provide for the child physically and emotionally. But it does appear that the best institutional care for the under-privileged and orphans

is less than mother can provide. Similarly, a father may do a tremendous job, but he too cannot match the special bond which can develop between a mother and child.

More of fathers in a minute, but first let us be clear about the very special importance of mothers. This needs to be stressed at a time when some would wish to undermine the role of the mother and suggest it is a bondage from which she deserves freedom. The mother who sees her task as dull, uneventful and unrewarding will no doubt long for the greater freedom that men appear to enjoy. Liberation from the kitchen sink is what many call for, with the opportunity to go out and work for equal pay with men.

Looked at from the other side, it appears that the apparently liberated male does not greatly enjoy the emancipation from house that his 9-5 job provides. Indeed industry and commerce constantly convulse with strikes as men express their dissatisfaction with their 'daily round and common task'. So it isn't where you are but what kind of a person you are that counts.

One unhappy lady who wandered here and there seeking happiness, gave up saying, "Wherever I go I take myself along, and that spoils everything".

I would want to propose that true liberation is the freedom to do the job one can do best. One of the special privileges a Christian parent has - mother or father - is to teach the children the real meaning of freedom. Only the one who has experienced the liberation of Christ's complete forgiveness from sin can explain the meaning of those words:

'Make me a captive Lord,
And then I shall be free.'

For the Christian there is a balance of freedom from one thing towards another. Dr. Jim Packer says 'Liberty, as the Old Testament conceives it means, on the one hand, deliverance from created forces that would keep men from serving and enjoying their Creator, and on the other hand, the positive happiness of living in fellowship with God under the covenant in the place where He is pleased to manifest Himself and to bless. Liberty is from slavery to powers that oppose God for the fulfil-

ment of claims upon one's life.' So you need not worry about taking yourself along, if you also take Christ. He says that He makes us into a new creation: "If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." (Jn.8 36).

Motherhood is something which achieved a new dignity in New Testament times. Just as the role of women generally was put on a lofty plane by the teaching of Jesus, so too a special tenderness surrounds the role of mothers. One thinks especially of the mother of Jesus, or John the Baptist, and how one of Jesus' last words from the Cross concerned His mother's welfare.

In recent years a great deal of study of the behaviour of mothers has shown how indispensable they are. For twenty years Dr. Bowlb, of London, who recently visited Adelaide, has been writing of the importance of mothers in the development of their children. He argues that there is a special bond between mother and child which enables the child to develop love, trust and security.

But it was the psychologist Erich Fromm who has emphasised the fact about motherhood which has a special spiritual lesson attached to it. He has shown that the special quality of mother love is that it is unconditional. In other words, a mother does not come to love her child because it is cuddly or pretty or desirable in any way. She just starts in loving it straight away. The baby is an extension of herself and is loved regardless of its behaviour or appearance, or health.

Fathers, it would seem, can come to love their children but it is by no means as spontaneous. Fathers are much more subject to whether the baby is wanted, or healthy, or asleep. When a baby is sick, or cries in the night, needs a feed or a nappy change, father-love is buried beneath the blankets and surprisingly deaf.

Mothers may have their reservations when baby does not stop crying or is an invalid, but the bond of mother-love can and should outweigh these things. In saying mother love is unconditional, I am saying that it appears fullblown with the child without any reward being

required.

Unhappily it does not always follow that this love will continue unconditionally; but it does have a special quality initially which is not matched by any other human love.

William Cowper's famous hymn takes us a step further:

"Can a woman's tender care
Cease towards the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee."

Here Cowper expresses the eternal and unchanging love of Jesus which is also unconditional; that is, regardless of our sinfulness, God in Christ has loved us from the beginning.

As John writes, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son...we love him, because He first loved us." (1 John 4: 10,19.)

Even when we turn against Him He continues to love us. I believe it may be the special privilege of mothers to provide the human expression of such unconditional love which allows

children to have a sense of trust and security out of which they can so easily give their lives to Christ as they come to understand His great love for all of us.

In speaking of the unique privileges of mothers, we may also learn from the Gospel set for this Sunday. In John 16.16 ff. Jesus speaks to his disciples of his plan to return for those who love him. He predicts their grief at his going but encourages them this way, "Though you will be plunged in grief, your grief will be turned to joy. A woman in labour is in pain because her time has come; but when the child is born she forgets the anguish in her joy that a man has been born into the world. So it is with you; for the moment you are sad at heart; but I shall see you again, and then you shall be joyful."

It would appear then that a mother who knows the special joy of childbirth can draw on her recollection of this as an assurance of God's love and his promise to return to us. To have such a personal assurance like this is an experience that should be treasured.

Without that special, close bond of mother and child, it may well be more difficult for children to understand the unconditional love of God. If that is so, should we not be dismayed at how many influences are undermining the family and preventing mothers from playing their vital role? If we recognise that a mother's task is a demanding, specialist one, we should also accept that it can best be achieved with the support of a good husband. Mothers and fathers should play complementary roles in bringing up the children. I suspect that much of the unrest one encounters among mothers arises not from their own inadequacies so much as from fathers being unaware of their vital balancing role. Too often is mother left at home to cope with the children while father is out - of course he has many sound reasons for being absent - like working overtime, travelling, playing golf, attending a committee meeting. Yet, dare I ask if these are not sometimes excuses to be absent when the children need his attention? Mother too often has to be mother and father in the home. Paul's instructions to parents in Ephesians 5 suggest an equal responsibility but with different tasks. There are great

dangers in expecting a mother to take both parts. Not unreasonably she will become overwhelmed with her task. From there she can either give up in despair, or she may shout for Women's Liberation as she sees men apparently having such an easy time.

Men and women are not interchangeable. Equal, yes, but also different, with special tasks to fulfil. I don't think that the New Testament justifies a Women's Lib. approach to the care of children. Rather than Women's Liberation I suspect we ought rather to support a Men's Unliberated Movement - that is, if the father accepts the reasonable demands that a wife and family place upon his interests and time, the equilibrium between the sexes could be restored in marriage. So it is Men's Unliberated Movement - or MUM'S the Word! In a happily-balanced shared responsibility in the home we can expect mothers to enjoy their task of mothering. We could then expect also a Mothers' Unliberated Movement - but only because one is already liberated in the fullest sense; without that spiritual freedom we shall feel caged wherever we are. MUM'S the Word again.

Paul's words (Eph.5: 22):

"Wives, be subject to your husbands" can only work happily when balanced by Eph. 5:25:

"Husbands love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for it."

Mothers who seek to resolve their dissatisfaction at home by going out to work are more likely to exaggerate their problem. If the dissatisfaction with home arises from the demands being too great, and father's part being too small, then going out to work can only increase the problem by increasing the load. Fathers are not notable for moving in at this point and easing the burden. The predictable results are that parents spend less time together and less time with their children while the routine of the home receives only superficial attention.

Here in the short term lie the seeds of marital disharmony, and a disturbed child. The longer term outcome could be divorce for the parents and a variety of unpleasant possibilities for the child. He may have to be cared

for by someone else; he may grow up in the home but be driven to delinquency. His efforts at achieving a successful marriage later, will be impaired. And while one for convenience says 'he' we must remember that daughters are at least as much at risk. A vicious cycle perpetuated through the generations starts terribly easily, but it is desperately difficult to discontinue that sequence. At present we see it escalating.

I am not here saying there is no place for working mothers. I am sure there are many occasions when mothers can and should have the opportunity to work outside the home. I am saying this will not work if the work is an escape from the demands of home. If a wife has time, energy, small family and a stable and reliable person who can stand in for mother when necessary, there can be benefits all round from her going out to work. In this context it is surely a scriptural principle that the needs of children are paramount.

A mother whose job prevents her staying home when a child is sick, or who is still out when the children come home from school is depriving

them of the expression of that unconditional love which is so vital. We need not be surprised that delinquency is high among the so-called 'latch-key' children who have to let themselves into an empty house at the end of school.

It is commonly answered by working mothers that they can only provide for their families through the extra income. And, of course, it can be clearly proved that the family could not afford its T.V. and new car unless mother went to work. Yet many families are trading their children's happiness for extra material things. Not only homes with working mothers, but also those where father does a second job to keep ahead of his credit payments, are giving priority to things and failing to give love and time. Our competitive, consumer society easily sweeps us into a pattern which erodes a truly Christian family pattern. Let us beware lest the world 'squeezes us into its own mould.' Even more important than providing for the physical wants of our children is that we should train and prepare them responsibly for what lies ahead. As we show love, integrity

and trustworthiness we give a model which will enable them to put their trust in Jesus Christ. As we rush and struggle for material goods we teach them that these are more important than anything else.

Larry Christensen, in his book "The Christian Family" quotes a housewife who looked back over her childhood;

'I had the meanest mother in the world!', writes a housewife, who is now raising a family of her own. 'While other kids ate candy for breakfast I had to have cereal, eggs or toast. When others had Cokes and candy for lunch I had to eat a sandwich. As you can guess, my supper was different than the other kids' also.

'But at least, I wasn't alone in my sufferings. My sister and two brothers had the same mean mother as I did.

'We had to wear clean clothes and take a bath. The other kids always wore their clothes for days. We reached the heights of insults because she made our clothes herself, just to save money. Why, oh why, did we

Have to have a mother who made us feel different from our friends?

'By the time we were teen-agers, she was much wiser, and our life became even more unbearable. None of this tooting the horn of a car for us to come running. She embarrassed us to no end by making our dates and friends come to the door to get us. If I spent the night with a girl friend, can you imagine, she checked on me to see if I were really there. I never had the chance to elope to Mexico. That is if I'd had a boy friend to elope with. I forgot to mention, while my friends were dating at the mature age of 12 and 13, my old-fashioned mother refused to let me date until the age of 15 and 16. Fifteen, that is if you dated only to go to a school function. And that maybe was twice a year.

'As the years rolled by, first one and then the other of us was put to shame. We were graduated from high school. With our mother behind us, talking, hitting and demanding respect, none of us was allowed the pleasure of being a drop-out.

'My mother was a complete failure as a mother. Out of four children, a couple of us attained some higher education. None of us has ever been arrested, divorced or beaten his mate. Each of my brothers served his time in the service of this country. And whom do we blame for the terrible way we turned out? You're right, our mean mother. Look at all the things we missed. We never got to march in a protest parade, not to take part in a riot, burn draft cards, and a million and one other things that our friends did. She forced us to grow up into God-fearing, educated, honest adults.

'Using this as a background, I am trying to raise my three children. I stand a little taller when my children call me mean and I am filled with pride.

'Because, you see, I thank God He gave me the meanest mother in the world.'

To be a mother who is fulfilled and content requires a right balance in several areas. She will have an inner peace only when all these areas are carefully integrated.

1. In relation to her children, she must express that unconditional love which she alone can offer, that special caring which is unique among mankind and yet serves as a model of the unconditional love God shows us in Jesus Christ. What a tremendous responsibility to have - to provide the foundations for a child to learn trust.

2. In relation to her husband, she needs that happy balance of helper, sustainer and lover which ensures an enriching experience for both.

3. In relation to herself she needs to be sure of the importance of the task to which she is called; to see that being a mother at home is no second-best activity but forms the stable basis of family life upon which so much else is built. "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" remains true. Other activities and interests need to be viewed against this priority.

4. In relation to society. We are in danger of losing sight of the pivotal place of the family in society. A good mother is the centre for a good

family; and society is as strong as its families. When we see society torn apart by divisions of distrust and disloyalty, we can look behind these public ills and see families with the same problems - disloyalty and distrust expressed in broken homes, divorce, promiscuity and stormy divisions. When we wonder if the ills of society can ever be countered, we may say that many significant answers lie with those mothers prepared to develop strong and loving families.

5. In relation to God; a mother needs to draw directly on the strength He gives if she is ever to meet the challenge before her. To be a source of encouragement and inspiration to her family requires that she too can draw on resources outside herself. It was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who sang,

"My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in
God my Saviour." (Lukel:46,47).

I think to be a good mother is a truly super-human task. For this reason many settle for a poor imitation of what they know they should strive for. But that is unnecessary when

Christ offers the resources of His love for personal comfort and to share. Mothers do not need to clamour for liberation, nor for that matter do fathers. Rather, we all need to enter into that experience of freedom which is ours as we fulfil the role God has for us.

That same hymn of Cowper's which speaks of a mother's love for her child goes on to speak of Jesus' love for each one of us:

"Mine is an unchanging love,
Higher than the heights above,
Deeper than the depths beneath,
Free and faithful, strong as death."

He ends with an expression of trust and love which we can all emulate:

"Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint,
Yet I love Thee and adore,
O for grace to love Thee more."

That is a prayer in which we could all usefully share. Whoever we are, let us recognise that, when compared with the unchanging love of God, ours is very weak and faint. Let us be glad that God has shown us His love not only

through the love of parents, but through His own Son. He has given us his unconditional love in that 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'. That is why He calls for our response, just as earthly parents long for a loving response from their own children. How much more must God long for our love expressed to Him. We would do well to echo from grateful hearts those last lines of Cowper's:

"Yet I love Thee and adore
O for grace to love Thee more.'

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Dr. Court speaks both as a Christian and as a clinical psychologist. Other publications he has written are mentioned inside this booklet.

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