

HOMILY

Pam Rhodes, Songs of Praise and Premier Christian Radio Presenter

Well, just thinking about the last line of that verse from Luke, "and a sword shall pierce your soul too," well that's probably quite an apt description of the experience of motherhood. Mostly times of joy and contentment and fulfilment, but also moments of concern and worry and fear. I'm a mum, I have two children and I look back on the birth of my first son Max and remember as I looked at that beautiful baby boy that in being born, what he had created in me was a mother.

And that was something I longed to be. And I do recall praying that night and making a promise to both Max and to God that whatever life brought in the years ahead, that the one job I was determined to do really well was to be a good mum. Well, life doesn't always go exactly as you imagine it will, does it, and nearly 18 years ago now, I married for a second time to a man with six daughters. So I became a stepmother to those six girls. And if any of you have ever been through that process of trying to merge two slightly battered families into one loving unit, well, it is a path that's fraught with pitfalls.

I felt as if I was walking on eggshells in the early days. Learning to be patient, to be a good listener. Sometimes to keep my mouth shut and say nothing because that was the wisest course of action. But most of all, to approach every single one of the girls in every situation with genuine love. And now all these years later, as on Mothering Sunday cards pop through the letterbox, some of them from the girls and some of them calling me mum and speaking of love. Well, I can tell you that that means the world to me, because that is a love I had to earn. But their generation, all those girls and Max too, they've all grown up and now they're parents in their own right. So I have a gaggle of grandchildren to enjoy now. And I can tell you that one of the nicest memories I will always hold onto is when you have two small grandchildren fighting over who's going to be allowed to sit on Nanny Pammy's lap. Oh, that makes being a grandmum so worthwhile. But just going back to where we started, that sword that pierces the soul.

Motherhood is not always a happy experience for everyone. For those who long to be mothers but it never actually happens, for those who become mothers but the experience contains a lot of pain and challenge, or for those who've never known a love from a mother of their own. Well God, we ask for your blessing on all of them. Bless them, keep them safe and bring them comfort in their pain. Now, every now and then you meet someone in life who becomes indelible in your memory. And when it comes to mums, the one that will always be in my mind is a lovely lady called Phyllis. She's an elderly lady, terrific personality.

I met her on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I don't know if any of you have ever been on one of those pilgrimage trips, but it's a whistle-stop journey really, travelling on a coach with about 40 of you. And there are so many places to see with names that you've known all your life from Bible stories, and you want to see them all. And generally we were a very happy bunch, except that there started being quite a bit of grumbling about Phyllis, because wherever we went she was always the last one to get back to the coach. She would always be ambling up in her own time and make us late. And well, I overheard some of them in the back row who were quite upset about this. And I heard one lady say, well, it wouldn't be so bad of course, if she was disabled or very elderly, but it's not that. It's her own fault really that she's slow, because she's wearing completely the wrong shoes. I could sort of see what she meant really because Phyllis was wearing flat flip-flops. I think you'd describe them, with just a bar of leather across the top, and they seemed several sizes too big for her. And well as that lady behind me said she was an accident waiting to happen.

And I'm sorry to say that it did. When we were all in Bethlehem Square Phyllis did take a tumble, and she was more shaken than hurt. But after that, I decided that I would just walk with her and we would go at her speed and I would make sure she got back on the coach on time. And it actually gave me a wonderful opportunity to get to know her a little. And she was telling me that she booked this pilgrimage a whole year earlier and it was the culmination of a life of faith for her to be able to go to the Holy Land. But most exciting of all was the fact that her son decided that he would like to do the trip with her, to do it with his mother. And so the year passed, and in that year, her son contracted a very severe form of cancer. And so he wasn't well enough to go when the date for the pilgrimage came round. And that meant that the shoes that she was wearing were his shoes because she wanted him to have the chance to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

How loving, how faithful, how humble. Oh, and how it echoed another young mother 2000 plus years ago, also in Bethlehem who'd given birth to a son with pride and watched him with all the concern and worry that we mums do as he grew up into a fine young man, and people sought out, who wanted to hear his words of wisdom. And yet she knew that one day she would watch him die. And I felt so ashamed that I had judged the book by the cover when it came to Phyllis along with everybody else on the coach, and I so nearly missed getting a glimpse of the precious person within. The person that God created and knows and loves unconditionally. And I'm so humbled by the depth of her love for her son and the depth of her love for God's son, God the Father. And I think, you know, when it comes to knowing the skills and the qualities that any parent needs, they are there as a perfect example in God's relationship with us and us with him.

I think if I had to create an image for that, to me it would be this, a cupped hand. Do you remember that quote from Isaiah, "I have carved you in the palm of my hand." God created us. He knows us. He loves us unconditionally. And so on this special day, when around the world we give thanks for mothers and motherhood, I want to thank God for the gift of all those children who have made me a mum and a stepmum and a grandmother, and mostly to be grateful that just like each and every one of them, I too am a child of God.

Amen.