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A Sword Shall Pierce Your Own Soul Too (Luke 2: 1-7, 21-35)

Mary, Mother of Our Lord (Pentecost XIII)

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Neil, Mum and I, together with Neil's son Alex, have just spent the last two weeks driving to Alice Springs, participating in a workshop with Aboriginal teacher and speaker, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, and driving home again. It was a long drive (!) and a rich time in conversation with Miriam-Rose and others who had gathered – in this reflection I want to bring something of this experience into conversation with our commemoration tonight of Mary, Mother of our Lord – the feast celebrated in the church's calendar on Wednesday last week.

Let me begin by saying something about our time in the centre. Some of you might remember that two years ago, in 2016, we attended a conference in Alice Springs called 'Exiled from Country: Deep Listening to the Spirit of Place' at which Miriam-Rose was one of the speakers. Miriam is from Daly River in the Top End and she's well-known for her teaching about 'dadirri' which she describes as 'quiet, still awareness and deep, inner listening'. Dadirri is like, she says, what Westerners call 'contemplation' ... it's both a way of being and a practice, a contemplative practice of attention – to self and other, to land and spirit. Last year, Neil and I participated in a desert journey with another indigenous teacher seeking to continue learning to pay attention in this way and to connect further with the Aboriginal wisdom tradition. The event this year was a workshop with Miriam-Rose – involving a group of about 40 or so who were seeking to go deeper in the practice of listening to land and in conversation with Miriam-Rose.

She spoke, as she had earlier about dadirri, deep listening. And since we'd been much more aware of seeking to practice this kind of attentiveness to the world around us, this session continued to deepen an awareness that had already begun to

grow in us. A second and added dimension of this workshop was an introduction to her art-work and also the work of her nephew Troy Mulvien, both of which appear in the Bible Society publication *Our Mob, God's Story* – a collection of paintings which interpret the Christian story through indigenous eyes and symbols.

One of Miriam's more famous artworks is her *Australian Stations of the Cross* series painted in 1974. Miriam described her painting as a form of prayer ... just as icon writing in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is prayer. Contemplated deeply, these panels of Miriam's Stations of the Cross are also like icons – they take you through the symbols to the reality they signify. I've several times heard Laurence Freeman say that Christianity is in the first instance a symbol system rather than a belief system ... and Mary is one of the most fruitful and potent symbols in the Christian tradition. Miriam's portrayal, her 'icons' of Mary, I find extraordinarily powerful and illuminating. In Stations of the Cross there are two panels depicting Mary and I want to describe them for you.

In the first, Mary faces Jesus as he carries his cross – their hands are stretched out to each other, and they touch fist to fist. Miriam-Rose told us that in indigenous culture a mother cannot embrace her initiated son – he has moved into adulthood and symbolically is separated from the Mother. This painting depicts the most amazing sense of connection yet separation, intimacy and otherness – the hands touching and yet the space between them is incredibly powerful and moving.

The second panel is after Jesus has died and he is taken down from the Cross. At that point, Mary can take her son's body into her arms for the last time. In Miriam's depiction, Mary's body and her son's merge together into one. When you look closely at the painting, you can see the absolute identity of their bodies as the dots and ceremonial markings overlay each other identically. She paints, in other words, just what Simeon had spoken when Mary and Joseph presented the infant Jesus in the temple – 'This child is destined ... to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too'.

At one level this just seems and is natural – it’s an experience we share with Mary in many different ways. When we love someone, we suffer when they suffer; their pain pains us. You might bring to mind the agony parents can undergo as they launch their children into the risks and hurtfulness of the world and see them suffer playground rejections, adolescent anxieties, broken-hearts, sometimes serious illness or abuse, even death; it can be the same for children caring for parents as they suffer dementia or other illness, and for partners and friends of those who are chronically depressed or anxious. It hurts to see those we love struggle with failure or defeat, with ageing or dying.

Of course, there are things we can and must do to help one another, but there’s also and necessarily a level of powerlessness we must accept in all our relationships. We can’t take another’s journey from them, we can’t take their place in the trials of their own lives ... but this is hard. And it’s the difficulty of remaining alongside, of embracing the suffering that others’ suffering causes us, that can lead us to abandon people (overtly or covertly) when they most need us simply to be with them.

Well, as Miriam-Rose captures so deeply, Mary, mother of our Lord, remains – just as Mary Magdalene remained. She stands by the cross with Jesus to the end. Not trying to rescue him, dissuade him, clutch at him, yet not abandoning him either. They consent to suffer Jesus’ suffering, to suffer *with* him. Poet Nicola Slee writes of Mary’s experience in the reading we just had in a powerful poem titled, ‘The Circumcision’.¹

She offers her baby to the knife
all trusting and openness

Her own body will be pierced
over and over
in ways she doesn’t know, yet

Before the story is barely begun
swords are out.

¹ Nicola Slee, *The Book of Mary* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2007), p.95.

And I want to make two further comments about this.

First, it strikes me that power of this symbol – this possibility of consenting to our suffering of others’ suffering – goes beyond our personal relationships of care and sorrow. It relates also to the possibility of being deeply present to the suffering of creation, of the poor, of the world around us. In our context here in Australia, Miriam-Rose’s icon of Mary is, it seems to me, a powerful invitation to ‘be with’ indigenous Australians in their suffering of the impacts of colonization and the continuing struggle for proper recognition and acknowledgement of their place in this land – their culture, their gifts and language.

Again, there are things we can and must do to address the injustices of the past and the many still perpetuated daily by racist attitudes, inappropriate interventions and policies. But some causes of indigenous suffering aren’t able to be quickly or easily fixed, and many can’t be fixed at all – I spoke to one older Aboriginal woman who told me that she had seen the last corroboree of her people. That whole life has gone, and she just has to bear the grief of that. There’s the loss of language and land, the families forever sundered, the children and young people who have taken their lives or become lost in addiction, displaced between worlds.

But our Western culture is so impatient, so unwilling to ‘suffer with’ – to be alongside as Mary is, unconsolated. We just want to ‘close the gap’, to solve the ‘issue’, to make it go away; and if the suffering and outworking of trauma seems unending, and all our best intentions ‘don’t work’, then we blame the recipients or come up with a whole new strategy for making it ‘better’ and inflict a whole new regime. But it’s our impatience that just makes it so much worse ... and one of the themes that came through from a number of the indigenous people who were present at this workshop was the cry – ‘will you stay with us awhile?’ Will you stop trying to fix us, and instead learn to be with us and journey with us? Will you bear your discomfort long enough to help us bear what we must bear, and find our way through all that has happened to and among us?

What this looks like, of course, is itself not easy to say – but this is the conversation I think we need to be open to ... and Mary has something to teach us.

And second. I said earlier that part of the power of the symbol of Mary is what it shows about the possibility of consenting to suffer the suffering of others. But it shows more than this. It shows that this consent is itself a necessary participation in the bringing about of God's healing of the world – Mary's passion symbolizes the human vocation in the work of salvation and reconciliation. God is present, grace is active in what Jesus undergoes ... but our participation is required and Mary is the one above all who offers herself bodily, with every ounce of her being, that love may be born and division healed.

As we remember her, as we gaze at this icon of her total openness to God's action and suffering love, I pray that we may learn something of our part in the healing of the wounds of our nation and our world.