

There is a scene in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, in which the two heroes are in a very dangerous situation, and one says to the other “It’s at times like this that I wish I had listened to my mother when I was younger.” His friend asks “Why? What did your mother say?” To which the reply, of course, is “I don’t know! I wasn’t listening!”

Well, I certainly didn’t listen to everything my mother said when I was young, but like most people, the older I get, the more I remember—and understand!—some of the things she said. My mother had a suitable phrase for most occasions, and there are times when the saying comes back to me complete with the sound of her voice.

- ▶ “Beggars can’t be choosers, Patricia!”
- ▶ “Waste not want not!”
- ▶ “Handsome is as handsome does!”

One of my mother’s favourite sayings was “What can’t be helped must be endured.” And like most people of her era, my mother had done a lot of enduring.

- ▶ She was born early enough in the 20th century to know what was happening when her three brothers went off to the First World War.
- ▶ She was only 8 years old when her mother died in the great epidemic of 1919.
- ▶ When she left school at 13, she had to find a job where she could live in because she had no home.
- ▶ She was born hard of hearing and by the time she was in her early twenties, she was completely deaf.
- ▶ She had 3 small children when the depression put my father out of work and a few years later the Second World War took him away.
- ▶ Her oldest grandson died at the age of 19 and her second youngest grandson died at the age of 17.

My mother endured with tenacity, and sometimes ferocity. I remember seeing her pull herself up to her full five foot one and clout a bus driver with her umbrella

because he turned his back while he was speaking to her, and on another occasion I saw her smack the cigarette out of the mouth of someone who was speaking to her, and telling them off their bad manners! (She was right about it being bad manners, but it was also impossible for her to lip read when someone turns their back, or has a cigarette hanging, and she wasn't going to tell them that!)

Her deafness was one of those things that couldn't be helped and had to be endured. Endurance is one of the messages in this morning's readings but first, on this day dedicated to mothers, I want to think a little about one of the things St. Paul said to the people of Athens. He said we are the offspring of God, and because we are the offspring of God, God is always near us.

The image of God as Father is a big part of our religious heritage, but it was a new idea to the people St. Paul was speaking to. They worshipped all sorts of gods, some they didn't even have names for, and their gods were either not interested in humans at all, or treated humans as entertainment.

The Jews, in the Old Testament, introduced the idea of God as a loving father who wants to provide for his offspring. For them, however, God was also a strict disciplinarian, fierce when annoyed, and always a little distant. Jesus taught that God is a loving and forgiving parent, always close and always ready to hear us.

These days it's fashionable to think of God as a mother as well as, or rather than, a father. There are even some quite good arguments for this. When we use a single metaphor for God we run the risk of thinking that we have completely described God, that we know who God is. Trying something different makes us realize that we can never put God in a box. But we'll leave that discussion for another day, and for today, let's just think about God as a loving parent.

Parental love is the most powerful example we have of love that gives without expecting a return. The first characteristic of parents is joy that their children exist. Just that. Sheer joy that another person, who as yet doesn't offer anything

in return, just is. And parents love the weak child as much as the strong child, the ugly child as much as the beautiful child, the smart child as much as the not-so-smart child.

What do loving parents want for their children? Well, regardless of the details, loving parents essentially want their children to have good lives, to be good people, to be happy. They want them to make the right choices in life, but they want them to make them for themselves, and this is very important. They want their children to become independent adults, to take charge of their own lives and to make the right choices.

The hardest thing of all to do as a parent of grown children is to let them be their own people. It's hard to watch your grown children making what you think are mistakes; it's hard to refrain from giving them the benefit of all that accumulated wisdom that we think we have.

Good parents let their grown children know that they will always be there to help when needed, that they will always love and always forgive. And then they let their children go and make their own choices. When their children make good choices, loving parents are happy for them; when they make bad choices, loving parents help them to get over it.

God wants us to have a good life, to be good people, to be happy. God wants us to make the right choices, not because we are forced to, but because we want to. God is happy for us when we are happy and always there to help and support us when we need it.

In the first reading St. Paul said that God is always near us, if we choose to seek him. In the gospel reading, Jesus told us that if we keep his commandments we will not be alone and comfortless: he will be with us in the tribulations of life.

Neither of them said that if we trust in God and obey the rules everything will be

smooth sailing. Life isn't smooth sailing. Life is just as full of troubles as it is of joys. We all have troubles, miseries, sorrows. We all have those parts of our lives that can't be helped, and so must be endured. But like the best of loving parents, God is there with help and support when we most need it.

God never turns us away: what keeps us apart from God is our own failings. Sometimes it's stubbornness. Sometimes it's guilty conscience, knowing that we have failed to keep those commandments. But our prayers can bring us back to God: prayer that acknowledges guilt; prayer that asks for guidance and strength; prayer that seeks comfort; prayer that asks God to be with us through the difficult times; prayer that brings that deep inner peace that makes it possible to go on.

It still won't be smooth sailing; there will still be trials and sorrows to be endured; but we don't ever have to be alone.

Amen.