

## **John | Her mother's voice**

*Fellowship@10, 10 May 2026*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on John 14:15-21*

Last week I caught up with someone who told me a sad story. She'd been cleaning up her mother's place when she found some old letters her mother had written. I would like to tell you how much her mother had praised her in these letters, but I can't. Instead, the letters were venomous. 'My daughter is so difficult. She's so brittle, so defensive, so selfish. She won't let me in. I can't understand why I had to have a daughter like that.' On and on it went.

Often when I catch up with friends, I get a story like that. Maybe, 'I'm fifty years old and my mother still carps on about my weight.' Or, 'My mother sets up endless rivalries between me and my sister.' Or, 'I accept that my mother never loved me. I had to learn how to love from a therapist and now I'm trying to love my mother.' Or even, 'I blocked my mother's number. I can't do this anymore.'

Today is Mothers Day, and for some this is a day of delight. It's a day to remember mothers with gratitude, to celebrate our adult children with joy, and to admire how those same children are raising wonderful kids of their own. If this is you, I'm deeply, deeply glad for you: and there are a million memes and Hallmark cards which celebrate your reality.

But if this is not you, or if your reality is more complicated, then listen in. Because for many of us, there are ruptured relationships between mothers and children. For many of us, our stories of mothers and mothering are heavily shadowed by shame.

Myself, I grew up in a hypercritical atmosphere. I know my mother loved me; nevertheless, I was told every day that nothing I did was good enough. I'd wipe the kitchen bench, and be yelled at for holding the sponge carelessly, or for knocking a few crumbs on the floor. I'd sweep, and she'd shout that I was doing it all wrong; when I changed how I held the broom, I was doing it even worse. Once, I dropped a drinking glass. She shrieked and sobbed as she accused me of destroying something precious and irreplaceable. Of course I became a timid, anxious, furtive child and a cripplingly self-conscious adolescent who was so defensive, and so filled with rage, that there were times when I could barely breathe.

Looking back, I can see now that my mother had issues which, for whatever reason, she was not able to address. But as a child, all I knew is that I was hopeless and worthless and just plain wrong.

Many of us know this feeling of being judged, and of being found wanting. Perhaps we, too, have an unwell or hypercritical parent or partner, who flings accusations like poison darts. Perhaps we have experienced mistreatment, even abuse, by another powerful adult in our lives. Perhaps we have a disability or degenerative disease, and have been told through word, deed, architecture and highly politicised cuts to welfare that we are nothing but a burden to society. Or perhaps we are gay or trans or somewhere else on the glorious spectrum of human diversity, and have been told every day in almost every possible way that we are not normal, that we'll never belong, and that we should feel ashamed.

Endless criticism, endless condemnation, endless judgement: they can diminish and destroy a person. According to John's story, this is exactly what the devil wants. For John structures his gospel account like a courtroom drama. On the one side, we have the devil, aka the enemy, aka the accuser, who will use all sorts of honeyed means to convince us to speak with his voice. Blame it on the Bible, or nature, or justice, or economics, or an idea of truth, or, quite simply, on being hangry. One way or another, the devil will find justification for each and every person to speak words of criticism, condemnation, and judgement.

Perhaps we speak our accusations aloud, criticising other people for things we do not approve of or understand. Perhaps we quote the Bible without context or kindness. Perhaps we put others down in a futile attempt to convince ourselves of our own worthiness. Or maybe we say harsh things to ourselves, rehashing the voices which told us we were never good enough, not worthy of being loved, unacceptable in God's sight. For whatever reason, however they emerge, stifling, destructive, even vicious words frequently pour from the lips of ordinary people. Politicians. Nice Christians. Your uncle. My mother. Probably you, and definitely me. For the enemy's words are everywhere, doing great harm.

On the other side, John paints a picture of the Holy Spirit, aka the paraclete, the advocate, the companion, the alongsider, the defence lawyer, the friend. This is the Spirit who intercedes on our behalf and defends us to the end. If life is a trial, John suggests, and we are being accused, don't worry.

Because we have a defence lawyer who will go to the mat for us, a constant advocate. This spirit communicates between us and God, interceding on our behalf. Even better, writes John, those who place their trust in Christ will be filled with this self-same spirit. She helps us follow Christ's commands, in other words, to love.

From this I draw two conclusions. One, that as those filled with the spirit of Christ, it is not ours to judge or condemn but to defend, to advocate, to encourage. Two, that the voice of accusation is not the final voice in my or anyone's story. We are not condemned to endlessly rehearse the criticisms which have been showered upon us by others, nor are we condemned to repeat the patterns unto the umpteenth generation. Our hearts no longer need be troubled; we need no longer be afraid.

I think those of you who know me would agree: I am no longer a cripplingly timid utterly self-conscious shrivelled up old prune, nor am I still infinitely defensive or on a hair trigger for rage. I believe this is because I am being slowly healed and transformed by the friendship of the Holy Spirit, which is so generously poured into me through the alongsiding of friends, family, church, Scripture and prayer. It's even been via the alongsiding of my mother.

Because she, like us all, contained multitudes. I have told you of the constant criticism, but not of the good: the stories, the laughter, the cherishing. The endurance in the face of roadblocks or pain. How we shared the pleasures of a good book, a beautiful garden, news of a family friend. The way she'd say I could do anything, and encouraged me to spread my wings. Shortly before she died, she told me of a dream she'd had. We were standing together, looking in joyful anticipation at a field of daffodils about to flower, and she knew I was going to flourish. The voice of accusation was very real and harmful, but it was not the only voice she spoke with. Like me, she, too, had been showered with constant criticism; she, too, was filled with competing voices; she, too, was trying to change patterns from her childhood; she, too, was learning to love. And like me, she did this imperfectly; but what I now see is that she tried, just as I have tried to interrupt the patterns and offer more encouragement, and less accusation, to my own kids, and to apologise when I fail.

So I wish I could come alongside her and encourage her, share what we've both learned, grow with her in love, but I can't; she died a long time ago.

Instead I tell you these things in the hope that it encourages you: things can change. How things were is not how the future must be; transformation is possible. We can learn to distinguish the voices, and we can learn to resist the accuser.

So if you are being attacked by the voice of the enemy, the voice which diminishes, deadens and destroys; the voice which says that you are not worthy, which snarls that you will never belong, and which whispers that God cannot love the person you have been made to be, then I hope and pray that you can hear this: these are the enemy's lies. More, you are not alone. You have an advocate in the Holy Spirit, who knows, loves and cherishes you, and intercedes on your behalf. Listen for her voice, whoever she speaks to you through.

On the other hand, learn to recognise and reject the voice which drives you down ever narrowing paths; the voice which corrodes and condemns, diminishes and denies. Don't use this voice, don't accept it from others, don't take its viciousness on. Resist even the urge to speak truth if it's neither necessary nor kind: because the truth of life in Jesus is utterly guided and shaped by love.

Follow instead the gentle voice which invites you into spaciousness, that beautiful place of being known, accepted, and loved as you are, a place where you can breathe deeply and grow. Seek people and communities where the Holy Spirit freely flows: where you encounter love, not loathing; acceptance, not judgement; freedom, not entrapment; generosity, not narrowmindedness; truthfulness, not secrecy and lies. And become a spacious person yourself.

And if someone is on your heart today, this is your charge: Pick up the phone and make a call, send a text, write an email, or message that someone, and share a word of acceptance, generosity, encouragement, and love. For as someone dwelling in Christ, animated by his spirit and witness to God's goodness, you are an agent not of accusation, but of grace. So make that call. Write that card. Send that text. Tell someone how awesome they are, and how glad you are to know them. Encourage them. Shower them with love. In the name of Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn but to save: go to it. Ω