

Sermon for March 14th 2021 - Mothering Sunday

By Pat Hemsley, Reader

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Amen

Another lockdown Mothering Sunday! It hardly seems possible, does it? However, that doesn't prevent us from celebrating, even if we can't be near those we love. When we mark this festival, we follow centuries of tradition, dating back to pagan times, when it was originally held in honour of the mother goddess, Cybele. On his conversion to Christianity, the Roman emperor Constantine encouraged its adoption as an occasion to honour the Virgin Mary and Mother Church. In England, the day was marked for several centuries, but by the mid 20th century the custom had almost died out. However, the arrival of American troops during WW2 triggered a revival and, as it became more widely used, the date of Mothering Sunday was set as the 4th Sunday in Lent; not a commercial event, but a lovely and thought-provoking Sunday in the middle of our Lent austerities.

It is mothering - the act of nurturing, caring and loving - that is at the heart of Mothering Sunday. Its name derives from two traditions; firstly in the Middle Ages this Sunday in Lent was the one when people returned to their "mother" church, the place of their baptism, for a special service, and secondly (and much later) this was the day when people in domestic service were allowed home to visit parents and family. In both cases, people went "a-mothering". This term, derived from the verb "to mother" of course implies, I believe, a very wide focus that includes everyone who nurtures, cherishes and cares, whatever may be the biological connection with those for whom they care.

Our readings today speak of two Biblical mothers: Hannah, who for so long had remained painfully childless, and Mary, whose baby started his life in tumultuous circumstances. The Old Testament reading reminds us of the promise that Hannah had made to God as she prayed desperately for a child; that if she were to be granted a son, his life would be dedicated to God. Now we see her fulfilling her promise and bringing her son, Samuel, to the temple to serve the priest, Eli. In the Gospel reading, we are confronted by Mary's agony as she watches her dying son on his cross of shame. In her pain and bewilderment, she must have remembered Simeon's words of thirty-three years before: "He will be a sign from God, which many people will speak against...and sorrow, like a sword, will pierce your own soul, too." Two mothers then, separated by centuries, but who both knew the full costs of mothering.

Mothering brings countless joys, but it can be painful, too. Today, we think of those who mothered us, giving thanks for their nurturing, selfless and tireless love. If our relationship with our mothers, our fathers, our “motherers” was a good and positive one, we have every reason to be grateful and to show our appreciation and love in as many ways as possible. However, there are so many others for whom this day will be a painful reminder of what is not; people who had dysfunctional, difficult or harmful relationships with their mothers, those, like Hannah who have not been able to become mothers, those who have become separated from beloved children for many different reasons, those whose children are irretrievably lost and - this year particularly - for mothers who have died and are greatly missed and mourned. We hold all these people in our prayers today.

Mothering, then, is nurturing, loving and caring, but Mary and Hannah also show us that mothering at its best should not be smothering. In order to allow someone to achieve his or her full potential in life, to fulfil his or her own calling from God, we eventually need in love to let go. By letting Samuel go, Hannah played her part in fulfilling God’s plan for him as one of Israel’s great priests. As Mary watched Jesus leave Nazareth, headed ultimately toward Jerusalem and the hill called Golgotha, she knew it was part of God’s purpose for him; hers was to let him go.

When we take on a “mothering” role, it is not about our ambitions and ideas for the lives of those we love. They and their values may not be what we had hoped for or envisaged, but we, like Mary and Hannah, need to trust in God’s purpose. “Letting go” is hard, but often necessary for a return to be possible – remember the Prodigal son; remember the mediaeval return to the “mother” church, the serving boys and girls returning to their families.

Reading the words from St. John’s Gospel, it’s impossible to imagine Mary’s anguish as she watched her son’s life slipping away. We know NOW that, as the pain she experienced at his birth created hope for the world, so the pain experienced at his death was bringing salvation to the world. Mary didn’t know that then; nor was she probably able to recognise in her pain the extent of her son’s continued “mothering” of her. In the midst of his agony, he cared enough to hand her into the care of the disciple he loved, John.

This is a profound moment; two people who loved Jesus, who knew him to be God’s Son and who believed in his mission, were united in grief at the foot of the cross as they watched him die. As Jesus entrusted them to each other, he established a new family. Mary and John formed a nurturing relationship with each other; they strengthened each other, offered mutual comfort, care, love and support and shared hospitality and encouragement with others. Out of this “mothering” grew the church, mother church, and these are still the hall marks of what church should be. In Hannah and Mary and John, we have examples of how mothering in faith, with God alongside, might look. It is the mothering we,

as church, should be modelling for those who find that other families, other communities have failed them; what we should be offering especially to those on the margins of society.

Today, as Christ's family at St. Botolph's. we are unable to return physically to our mother church. The building, like many others, is closed because of the pandemic and also, in our case, because building works make it impracticable to use. We're unable to offer flowers, as a symbolic gesture of love and appreciation to all the ladies in the congregation.

However, as I said, this does not prevent us from celebrating all the love, care and nurturing that our church family offers, both to one another, but also to those in our community. Last March, we had to let go of much of our church life. As we stood then at the foot of our COVID19 cross, where Jesus suffered with us, he gave us into each other's care and in so doing gifted us with more than we could have imagined. Via Zoom and any other means available we've reached out to support and strengthen, to comfort and pray for.....indeed to "mother" not only each other, but those in our wider community.

Sometimes in literature, God is addressed as "she", a being who reveals truth as she heals, is ever present, but never over demanding. Indeed, we are all God's children and the mothering we receive at God's hands is supreme. God knows when to hold us tight and yet when to let us go. God's love is sacrificial; he has done everything possible for us, his wayward children, and yet still we think we know best. When we leave him, he stands with open arms ready to welcome us home. As we give thanks for the earthly mothering we've known, we stand in awe before the immense love given so freely by our heavenly Father. Today we have so much to rejoice in and that's what makes this Mothering Sunday a special one.

Happy Mothering Sunday.

Amen