

Readings for Mothering Sunday

19th March 2023

First Reading: Exodus 2:1-10

A man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'

Second Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Gospel: St John 19:25b-27

Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

A Reflection for Mothering Sunday

Today is *Laetare* Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, also known, of course, as Mothering Sunday. The name, *Laetare* Sunday comes from the introit to the Latin Mass for this day: *Laetare Jerusalem et conventum facite omnes qui diligitis eam.*, which translates as 'Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her'. Jerusalem: the centre

of Judaism and the place where the original mother church of all Christianity was established in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

In mediaeval times, Mothering Sunday was about returning to 'mother church', the Cathedral of the diocese or another major church in the area. Although it was often an occasion where children working away from their homes would meet up with their families, it was only incidentally about mothers. Later, it became a day when servants were given a holiday to visit their mothers. Now, conflated with Mother's Day, it has become inextricably linked with mothers and that makes it very difficult for some. However, the attributes of the church and of God that we think about on Mothering Sunday are not unique to women; they are characteristic of all good parenting and other nurturing relationships, and it is vital that we remember this if all are to feel accepted and included.

We are very familiar with the Old Testament imagery of God as Father, but there is also plenty which relates to God as Mother. The quotation 'Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her' comes from Isaiah (66:10) and, a few verses later, God says 'As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem'. The prophecies of Isaiah contain other imagery of God as a human mother, in particular that just as a mother cannot forget a child she has borne, so God cannot forget us (49:15).

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the prophet Hosea portrays God as being like an angry mother bear rising to protect her cubs (13:8). Perhaps more familiarly, we see God described as being like a mother bird sheltering her children under her wings (Ruth 2:12 and several Psalms), an image picked up by Jesus when he speaks of his desire to gather the children of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:27, Luke:13:34).

The readings for Mothering Sunday tell us stories of the love of caring parents, of the joys and anguish that can bring. They are very real stories that are just as true in the present day as they were in ancient times.

As many parents know, loving parenting can mean hard choices. In the story of Moses, his mother expressed her love for him by letting him go; if she had not done so he would certainly have been killed. Separation of parents and children is a situation that would be recognisable to many families across the world today. We can think of families separated by war – how many pictures have we seen in the last year of Ukrainian families being separated as mother and children flee to safety while the father stays to defend the country. Other families are separated by the need to work far from home to earn a living, leaving children to be raised by grandparents; yet others through family breakdown, or through the lack of support for vulnerable parents unable to cope. Moses' separation, at least in part, from his birth family, led to him growing up in a complex web of relationships, caught between the Hebrew people of his birth and the royal court of Pharaoh. Complex relationships are also characteristic of many families today. But through this complexity, Moses was formed into the person who would lead God's people to freedom from slavery.

And, in our Gospel reading, we find Mary facing the worst moment any parent could ever imagine. She was almost certainly a widow by this stage. Watching her son being executed, watching him suffer and die, there is nothing she can do to help him, and she is alone in her pain and sorrow. And yet, not quite alone. Jesus, in the midst of his own pain and anguish on the Cross, recognises that she will need support as she struggles with her heartbreak. He reaches out to her and connects her with his beloved disciple: 'Here is your son', 'Here is your mother'.

In that culture, as the eldest son, Jesus had the responsibility to care for his mother and, as he died, he passed this on to his closest friend. We are told that the beloved disciple, John, took Mary into his home, forming a new family

to give strength and support. We may wonder why Jesus entrusted his mother to his friend and not to one of his own brothers – we know he had both brothers and sisters. Perhaps it was because, at that stage, his brothers did not recognise Jesus for who he was. Elsewhere, the Gospel says ‘For not even his brothers believed in him’ (John 7:5) – something that changed later. Perhaps it was because John was there, at the foot of the Cross alongside Mary, whereas there is no mention of the presence of any other members of Jesus’ family. Whatever the reason, we know from Acts (1:14) that Mary remained in Jerusalem with the disciples, including John, and was with them there after Jesus’ ascension.

In creating this new home and family for Mary, Jesus shows the importance of deep love between parents and children, but he also shows us that such relationships of love, care and support are not limited to parents and children; that the expression of this love can occur in other relationships of care and support. It is a message of hope for those for whom relationships have broken down, for whom relationships have been unhappy or impossible, that all is not lost, that other such relationships are possible.

Love, care and support should also characterise relationships within the church – the church is, after all, often described as a family and it should be somewhere we all feel nurtured. In the passage from the letter to the Romans, Paul describes some of the attributes we need to cultivate if we are to live as a family – compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. So important, yet how difficult they sometimes are – in any family. ‘Bear with one another...’ he says; isn’t that so human? Like any family, we have to bear with one another, forgive one another, love one another ... and that may sometimes be through gritted teeth for we all make mistakes. But we need to do it because we are called by God to be one body, the church.

On Mothering Sunday, we are called to ‘Rejoice’. We rejoice that we have a God who loves us and forgives us, who will comfort and protect us. We rejoice that we have a God who recognises all the complications of human relationships and works through them to shape us into who God would have us be. We rejoice that we have a God who sent his Son to be part of a human family, sharing the joys and sorrows, and founding a church to be a family that, for all its human weakness, aspires to mutual love, care and support.