

Readings for the Fourth Sunday in Lent – Mothering Sunday

10th March 2024

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

from Rev’d David Higgon

Today, on Mothering Sunday, our Bible readings speak of four women who found the surprising grace of God in what were desperate and heart wrenching situations.

Our Old Testament reading serves to remind us of the fear mothers have for their children's safety in times of violence and oppression, and our Gospel reading tells of God's grace in the midst of the desolation of a mother watching her son's agonising death.

I cannot begin to imagine the torment of the mothers of Gaza, the Ukraine, Sudan and so many other places, whose lives are in torment and who live in perpetual fear for their children, or who grieve over their loss, and of children who too are grieving over the loss of parents and siblings. It is a sad fact that in today's world, that children who make up less than one third of the global population account for over 40% of the world's refugees. Furthermore, half of the world's 2.2 billion children are already at extremely high risk of the impacts of climate change.

We can empathise with Moses' mother who in fear for the life of her new baby, takes desperate measures to ensure his survival. There were three women involved in his survival: first, his mother who used her intelligence and skill to hide the baby and who was rewarded with the care of him at least until his weaning (maybe at around five years old); secondly, the Egyptian princess who had compassion on the child that she found; and thirdly, his sister who stood at a distance to watch, but who came forward bravely with a suggestion for his birth mother to nurse him.

Then and now children need care and support from different people. Biological parents are very important, but others need to take on their roles and responsibilities to bring up a child successfully, such as health professionals, childminders, nursery workers, and school staff. This month there have been reports of how here in the UK, unaccompanied refugee children are being failed, abused and exploited because of the current Home Office system.

Both our stories speak of God's Grace. John's Gospel tells of the grace bestowed by Jesus even in the midst of his own agonising death, as he seeks to reinforce the bond between his beloved disciple and his mother, and our Old Testament reading tells of God's grace acting through three women to ensure the survival of the prophet Moses.

In Christianity, grace sums up the relationship of God with creation. It depicts this relationship as grounded in the freedom of God's love towards the perfection of God's communion with creation. The manifestation of God's grace is in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. To use less churchy words, grace is inspired by the notion of our giving of something over and above what is due, legally, economically or morally. It is a gift freely given, rather than being based on the idea that if we give something we can expect something in return. Grace is rooted in sacrifice. It is an expression of friendship, respect, appreciation and love which comes from the heart and not from a sense of obligation. What is given is given freely without the expectation of receiving something in return. The women in our bible readings today are recipients of God's Grace in the most challenging and desperate situations.

These bible stories have an obvious application for people who care for children who are not their own – those who have adopted or fostered (like the princess) or who have taken on the care of their grandchildren or nephews and nieces. This could be widened to those who support children in health work, childminding, nurseries and schools. From my own experience, what you try to do as a foster carer or adoptive parent is to build a close bond with the child. To give then the love and security they need to flourish as human beings. This can be hard work and it requires a great deal of patience and resilience because the experience of children in care is also one of physical and emotional trauma.

I am firmly of the opinion that children should only be taken into care as a very last resort. Every effort needs to be made to keep children within their birth family. Unfortunately, the majority of children who are taken into care are

for their own protection, having suffered abuse or neglect, both physically and emotionally, while in the care of their birth families. Being taken into care just adds to a child's trauma, as they have to deal with the trauma of being taken from their birth family and of having to deal with the bereavement of losing the most important people in their lives.

Living and working with children in care is always very challenging, as children in these circumstances show traits of what psychologists label Attachment Disorders. For the child in care, the world as they perceive it is a hostile place. Adults are not to be trusted, especially those in positions of authority - social workers and the police. These children may display traits of poor impulse control, and may have a poorly developed sense of conscience, they may experience delays in their physical development, but especially in their emotional development. They can have extreme control issues, fuelled by a sense that they themselves must have control over their lives. And they can show traits of cruelty and are capable of severe taunting which often alienates them from their peers.

It is no wonder that children in care find themselves disadvantaged from the very start and that disadvantage often follows them into their adult lives, as I have witnessed myself while working in prison. A lot of children who have been through the care system end up in prison and it is only by the grace of God that there are not more going through the criminal justice system.

There are over 100,000 looked after children in the UK of which 75% are with foster parents, but less than 5% of them will be adopted. This number of 100,000 children in care is just the tip of the iceberg, as there are hundreds of thousands living with kinship carers: grandparents, aunts and uncles.

The contribution that foster carers and kinship carers make is invaluable. The love, patience and appropriate discipline experienced in their care forms an important building block in a child's early development. But ultimately, the best place for a child is with his birth parents.

Parenting takes on many diverse forms. In the past we thought that only the standard model of family of mum, dad and 2.4 children was somehow blessed by God. The families broken by divorce; or beset by difficulties – mental illness, drug addiction, chronic poor health and so on – do not appear to be so blessed. But they too are blessed by God.

The Bible urges us to turn our assumptions on their heads. God chooses the weak, the oppressed, the disadvantaged and not only cares for them but raises them to positions of strength and power. God looks with love, and – dare we say – respect, at the person who struggles with all kinds of difficulties and who often cares for children in those circumstances. God looks with love on all children, and we need to let the thousands of children in care know that they too are loved and are not unwanted children, and particularly those who reach our shores as unaccompanied child refugees.

On this Mothering Sunday may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God be with mothers now and always, and especially those who live in fear today for their children.