

Sermon for Mothering Sunday 2021

Did you know that **Mothering Sunday** was dreamed up by the church sometime in the sixteenth century and had no connection to human mothers at all? So why mothering then?

It was all about your "mother church", which is to say the main church or cathedral of your region. It became a tradition that, on the fourth Sunday of Lent, people would return to their mother church for a special service. This pilgrimage was known as "going a-mothering", and sometime later it became something of a holiday event, with domestic servants traditionally given the day off to visit their own families as well as their mother church. It being in springtime there'd be wild flowers by the roadsides and so the tradition grew up of picking posies for Mum. She would no doubt be providing food and getting excited about the annual family reunion.

Mother's Day is a secular festival, started in America centuries later in honour of human mothers and they celebrate in May. Nowadays we in the UK seem to have merged the American festival with the religious one.

About thirty years ago Alan Freeman revived an old mothering Sunday tradition here at St John's that some of you might remember. He asked us to come outside and embrace our mother church by forming a great circle round the building all holding hands. It was fun and rather moving too.

I wonder how mothering Sunday cum Mother's Day is for you today: March 14th 2021? Lockdown's not making it easy for mothers to see grown-up children or children to see aging mothers. We can't celebrate together here in church either – for the second year running. But there are things some of us might choose to do instead.

I'm feeling happy because my lovely daughter's organised a zoom with her brothers to get them together for me for this special evening. I'll be cracking open the fizz! But I'm all too aware that it can also be a day to be dreaded, a day of intense pain. Those of us with children can experience both joy and pain in our parenting. Those without children by choice might well be quite content today, but there are others who have told me they absolutely hate Mothering Sunday. They feel deeply painfully cheated out of something they'd really hoped and longed for and Mothering Sunday cum Mothers' day seems to rub their noses in it. The Bible does give examples of those who feel the pain of childlessness, but there always seems to be a miraculous happy ending: Hannah with baby Samuel, Sara with Isaac, Elizabeth with John the Baptist.

Wherever you stand in all of this, you are not alone.

We all have one thing in common though, as we think today about mothering; we've all had a birth mother, though our relationships with them will be unique to us. When we think about our parents from an adult perspective we need to try to understand, if we can, where any difficulties between us might have come from. As a teenager I struggled, often very ungraciously, to escape from what I felt as my mother's totally unreasonable anxiety and possessive desire to control me. It even went on into my adult life. Now I understand better where it all stemmed from; snatching your baby from a cot in the middle of the night and rushing down to the air raid shelter wondering if you might be killed at any moment, is enough to make anyone a bit overanxious and possessive!

Understanding the reasons doesn't magic the problems away though. Painful and difficult feelings can still arise and sometimes threaten to overwhelm us. Damage may have been done and some serious help needed to get free of anger, guilt and a variety of other pains and traumas. As our parents get old and frail more problems arise. In some ways we may have to become a parent to them and they don't always like that! Doing it with graciousness and patience isn't always easy. Love and duty jockey for position. In all our relationships, joy and pain are interwoven.

In Mary and Joseph's parenting of Jesus we see that very clearly. We know about both the pain and the joy surrounding her pregnancy and his birth, the terror of having to flee by night to protect him from murder by becoming refugees, and the stress of nearly losing him as a teenager on their Passover trip to Jerusalem. Whatever else goes on in their home before he embarks on his controversial three year ministry, or what happens to Joseph, we don't know, but as her son gets into more and more conflict with the powers that be, Mary clearly becomes stressed and anxious. When he's told that she and his brothers have come to speak with him, possibly to beg him to come home to safety, he says "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother".

That must have been hard to hear.

Finally the inevitable happens. The worst nightmare. He's executed in the cruellest way the ruling Romans can devise. In today's gospel reading we find Mary standing beside him in silent agonized support as he slowly suffocates to death in unbearable pain, for that's how crucifixion works. As he looks down at his brave loving mother, he finds the strength to commend her to the care of his dearest friend. Deeply, deeply moving. How racked with grief she is, but how amazing her joy will be at his resurrection!

In his letter to the Colossians that we read earlier, St Paul gives us a wonderful blueprint for family life. Loving forgiveness is at the heart of it, but this can be very costly, as we see supremely in the life of Jesus. Here Paul's focussing on a wider family, the family of the church. It's a family where everyone has a place, where we're all interrelated, children of the same parent.

Whether or not as individuals we have children or siblings or parents or other relations, God is both father and mother to everyone. Because society was patriarchal for so many millennia and our own society is only just emerging from this model, we usually address God as father, but in the Bible God really is both father and mother.

For example, there are places in the Bible where God's described, metaphorically, as having a womb. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:18, we read "You forget the rock who begot you, unmindful of the God who gave birth to you." **The God who gave birth to you!**

Sometimes God's described using feminine terms in other ways, for example, in Isaiah 66:13 God says, through the prophet, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." **As a mother comforts her child"**

In Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34 Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" **Do you ever think of Jesus as a mother hen?**

None of us had perfect mothers and fathers. None of us can be perfect mothers and fathers and it can sometimes be very difficult, for many painful reasons, to see God as the ultimate perfect loving parent.

In this beautiful but broken world, joy and pain will always be interwoven. But we can rest assured, today and every day, that whatever life throws at us on our earthly pilgrimage, we **are** all unique and precious and infinitely loved by God.

Ultimately all will be well. Amen.

Carole Lewis