

Mothering Sunday (4th Sunday of Lent)

This Sunday marks the halfway point in our journey through Lent. To mark this important milestone and, in a sense, to give encourage to us on our way towards Holy Week, this day has a much less penitential flavour as the church observes not just one but three things, namely the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Refreshment ('Laetere') or joyful Sunday and of course Mothering Sunday.

In fact in some churches, they dress the church building (and their clergy in rose pink), as a way of marking a Lenten Sunday with an outburst of Jesus' light and hopefulness.

As *part* of Mothering Sunday, we remember and honour all that mothers do, in days gone by children working in large houses could return home for the day and many Christians would make pilgrimages to the church in which they were Baptised or even go from their local parishes to the mother church of the diocese. So, for us it would have meant the long journey to Chester. Can you imagine doing that by horse and rickety cart!

But what of the readings and gospel offered for today? The Church in her wisdom made my job harder today by giving two Gospel readings to choose from. And being the good Anglican that I am, I've chosen the 'middle way' and bring you a musing on both!

One is Simeon's prediction to Mary that her child Jesus would suffer and that her heart would be so broken by what would happen to him that it would feel like 'a sword had pierced her soul' ouch!

The second takes us to the foot of the Cross and to the suffering Christ, who from that place of agony thought not of himself but those he was leaving behind and called out to his beloved friend John, and to his Mother, Mary, "Behold your Son" and John, "Behold your Mother"!

As I thought about these Gospel stories, I found that although they initially seemed very different and it truth be told not overly cheerful for a day of lightness and refreshment!

They in truth complement each other hugely and to those things which Lent, Mothering Sunday, and Refreshment Sunday express they both bring great insight and dare I say Joyfulness too?

What they express to me, and I hope you too, is a message about truth and love.

Both stories describe moments of absolute naked truth. We are drawn straight into the tangible love of a mother and her son as it is revealed to the entire world, not from some social media prepared moment where all is well but from a very real moment of complete and utter emotional rawness.

Most relationships come with a risk of hurt or pain and it seems it was no less the case for Mary or for her beloved Son either. The joy here, however, is not only that this confirms yet again that our God gets what it's like to be truly human, but also that he reaches into our moments of challenge, lifts us up and holds us safely under his wings, whether his doing so is obvious to us or not.

Today's Gospels then swing between total desolation and heart melting consolation. And although it might be tough reading, its good!

The two Gospels offered, allow for an understanding of both human and divine love in action. Both stories involve pain yes. But that's not the whole picture here. To fully appreciate what is happening and its meaning for us.

We have to understand what is happening with thankfulness and joy. It might sound strange but is through these moments of pain that God was and still is leading us to a place where through Christ, his desire for us to once again be with him without fear or barrier came into being.

From the Cross, Jesus offers new life as his church and proclaims aloud that even when we find ourselves in great sadness and challenge there is always a beautiful light breaking through any overwhelming darkness. God is holding us in the palms of his hands!

Jesus' words 'Behold your Mother', 'Behold your Son' are symbolic of our calling to love each other as the church. In the Cross, life and death mixes and merges in that ultimate sacrifice of love embodied by Jesus that would forever ensure that we have a home with the God who tends to His children as a mother hen tends to her chicks keeping them sheltered under her wings.

In the actions of Christ to his mother and beloved friend we are also being shown that the Lord remains mindful of our needs to be loved. In short, he has led us all to each other in this church benefice at this specific time for a unique and Godly purpose. So, we can be held and hold one another as family, just like Jesus' disciple gave Mary a home and held her after that day at Golgotha, he has given us to one another. What a mysteriously beautiful thing.

If you ever need a reminder of that love, go and stand in front of the Icon which sits behind the Altar in the Shakerley Chapel at St Oswalds. Behold your Mother; Behold your Son! Perhaps it should be our family motto!

In conclusion: At each Holy Communion I say a silent prayer as I mix the water and the wine. It's based on an ancient priestly prayer used across the centuries, its not something heard by the congregation, but I think it's helpful to mention in light of these passages of scripture. And it goes something like this:

By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity and for this I give thanks to you my God'

It is a recalling of both Jesus' painful sacrifice and at the very same time the power of his absolute love which created the church family and adopts us all into a life unity and hope. Like the water and the wine on the Altar, God's life and Our lives mix and merge together through that communion into a beautiful tapestry of faith and abundant life. In as much as it is Love that holds the trinity together, that brought the Son of God to walk among us in human form, It is that same love that holds us all together as his children and as a church.

And this is why Mothering Sunday is so important, it's a reminder that whatever our own earthy parental experiences may have been, the good, the bad and the ugly; whatever familial trials we may be facing this day, *God's* parental love enacted out by Jesus on the cross is something very very other.

God comes to us and doesn't fail or neglect, God doesn't walk away, nor does God lash out at us in anger. The Lord only ever reaches out to each and every one of us in divine paternal grace and unyielding maternal love. So, look up this refreshment Sunday and sing a song of praise. For you are loved!

Yes! Today let us give thanks for the love we see in the eyes of those around us; let us rejoice before God for those who have offered us a mother's love along the way. May we be ever thankful for the gift of each other, the maternal nurture of the church; for Mary's witness as Jesus' mother, But above all may we dance like David danced in thankfulness and joy because the same supernatural love that through Christ conquers all is surrounding us in an embrace unlike any we have ever known!

Happy Mothering Sunday.

FrM