

“Mothering”

[Exodus 2: 1-10](#), [John 19: 25-27](#)

I am sorry that our Mothering Sunday services have had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus. For many people, not being able to meet together today, of all days, brings with it an enormous sense of grief.

We are grieving because the normal run of life has ground to a halt. This is not a trivial thing. Families are unable to meet; those hoping to see mothers, grandmothers and other people particularly dear to us on this day are bereft, as are those mothers and grandmothers. Our pubs and restaurants have been forced to close. Leisure activity has been curtailed. The sight of bare supermarket shelves unnerves us. People’s jobs are in limbo.

Pause: What are you grieving for this morning? Take a moment to reflect on those things. Name them before God, and hand them over to Him.

On this exceptional Mothering Sunday, our two Bible readings offer us visions of mothering which are both born out of grief and harrowing times: in our reading from Exodus, it is a response to the oppressive rule of Pharaoh, who had decreed that “Every boy that is born [to the Hebrews] you must throw into the Nile.” In our Gospel reading, Jesus is hanging on the cross with his mother Mary amongst those watching him in his agony, distraught at his pain and also knowing that following his death in such shameful way as crucifixion, she could be alone, disgraced and destitute in the future.

In Exodus 2, a Hebrew woman becomes pregnant and instead of celebrating the safe delivery of a healthy baby boy with her husband and daughter, has to wrestle with the prospect of abandoning him to the mercies of the River Nile. She tries to do what she can to help, by making a little coracle so that he will not drown at her hands. It is a form of sacrificial love. This action must have stretched her trust in God: how would he intervene?

Pause: Reflect on those women who have to give up their children to be cared for by others. Pray for them and organisations such as Tomorrow’s Women Wirral supporting women who might otherwise have their children put into care.

As the woman lets her son go, so others are filled with compassion. Pharaoh’s daughter sees the abandoned baby and takes pity on him. He will grow up under the support of the regime which had tried to kill him at birth as “he became her son” when he was older.

Miriam, Moses' sister, watches from a distance to see what will happen and later is able to reunite mother and son by resourcefully offering her mother to be a wet-nurse to Moses. What's more, his mother is paid for her services; a double blessing under the circumstances.

The women in this account are all playing their part in God's loving story of rescue and care for his people. God knows that humans are flawed and can be infinitely cruel to one another, but in the midst of this cruelty, through the loving actions of these women, he demonstrates a different model, full of grace.

There can be few acts crueller than crucifixion, yet in the midst of this cruelty, we see an act of gentle kindness. In the midst of giving himself up on the cross, Jesus gives his mother into the care of "the disciple whom he loved": John.

Jesus is ensuring her safety and wellbeing in a world which would have had no apparatus to help a lone widow woman with no sons to support her (his brothers are not mentioned in this scene).

John responds by taking her to his home in more than just a literal sense. She becomes his mother, and he her son: they are united by their love of Jesus, who has knit them together in his invitation: "Here is.."

The message here for us is that Jesus calls us to extend our sense of family beyond biology. No-one should be left out. Our mothers, our brothers and our sisters come to us as a gift from Jesus: the family of faith.

Pause: There are many women and men who are gifts to us in our church and wider community, being mothers to many through their presence and actions. Give thanks for them. Consider especially those who find Mother's Day very difficult: those who are unable to have children of their own, who have lost their mothers or whose relationships with them are strained.

But we should also use these powerful moments of grief and joy to help us to re-think our understanding of who God is as well. You will notice that I've used the masculine pronoun, "he", but God is not bounded by our notions of gender and their attendant stereotypes.

Jesus grieved over Jerusalem, saying, "how often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings," (Matthew 23:37) and in Isaiah 66:13 God is portrayed as a comforting mother also: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you."

What we know as “Mothering Sunday” or “Mothers’ Day” was known for many centuries in the Catholic church as “Laetare Sunday” – a Sunday to ease back on the harsh discipline of Lent and to rejoice (which is what Latin word ‘Laetare’ means): as the opening verse (or introit) for the service of the Fourth Sunday in Lent puts it: “Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her” (Isaiah 66: 10).

Although we share grief at our loss of being able to gather together this Mothering Sunday, let us also join with this encouragement to see God at work, and to rejoice.

We can show our joy in many different ways. Let’s take the opportunity to slow down and rest where and while we can, taking in the beauty of spring which is bursting into life all around us, giving thanks for God’s creation – or Mother Nature, if you will. We can encourage one another through conversation on the telephone or social media, and acknowledge one another in smiles and waves if we are out walking can be a joy. We can help bring shopping out to those who are housebound or without transport.

We are joining in a new kind of “mothering”: supporting one another, nurturing, encouraging, and even holding one another to account and in check against behaviour or actions that may be harmful to ourselves and others, like not staying put when told to, or stockpiling things.

Let us look afresh at these Bible readings and trust that, even in the midst of tribulations, God is at work and can turn our despair into rejoicing.

The Collect for Mothering Sunday

God of love,
passionate and strong,
tender and careful:
watch over us and hold us
all the days of our life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.