

## Sermon for Mothering Sunday – 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2014

I Samuel 1: 20 – end Luke 2: 33 - 35

+ The church calls today Mothering Sunday, the secular world calls it Mother's Day. To my mind the 'Mother's Day' tag is rather limiting, because we're encouraged to shower one person with cards, flowers and gifts. There's nothing wrong with that of course, but the church's preference for 'Mothering Sunday' implies a far more inclusive approach, allowing for the possibility that mothering may be – and frequently is - more than simply a biological relationship. Mothering, in a loving, caring, nurturing sense is something all we Christians should be doing, as we encourage new disciples. But how effectively are we as the church nurturing and equipping others? Are we undertaking this task to the best of our ability?

If we look to the Christian tradition we have several models of 'mother' to take as examples of how we might approach the demanding, complicated practise of mothering, or nurturing. I'd like to look at three of these models and see what we might learn from them:

The most obvious is the model of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of our Lord and the exemplar of motherly perfection. Now I know that when they hear her name many Christians need to go and lie down, but because today is an occasion for lightening up on our Lenten discipline and solemnity, an occasion even to laugh, I'd like to tell you about a very devout lady who we'll call Mrs O'Donnell. Mrs O'Donnell was devoted to the Virgin Mary and after a long life, well lived, Mrs O'Donnell finally died and of course went straight to heaven. She was met at the gates by St Peter, who welcomed her in and offered to show her the way to meet God our Father. 'Oh no', said Mrs O'Donnell, 'I'm not going to meet God our Father first, I want to meet the Virgin Mary. I have something very important to ask her, which can't wait'. St Peter protested and said that wasn't the way it worked, but eventually he had to recognise he'd met his match so he went to see what he could arrange. God graciously agreed to allow Mrs O'Donnell to see the Virgin Mary first, so she was ushered in. 'Oh Mrs O'Donnell', said the BVM, 'how lovely to meet you at last and thank you so much for all your devotion over the years. But why did you want to see me first, what is it that you wanted to ask me?' 'Well', said Mrs O'Donnell, 'all these years I've looked at pictures of you, statues of you, icons of you and in all of them there you are, a beautiful young woman with a lovely baby. But you're never smiling, you always look so mournful and I just have to know why.' Oh Mrs O'Donnell', sighed the BVM, 'I always wanted a girl.'

In reality of course we know very little about the Virgin Mary; she's mentioned by name less than 20 times in the entire Bible. We can deduce though that being the mother of God's Son was profoundly testing and that Mary, like Hannah with her longed-for son Samuel, trustingly committed her Son into God's hands. In the reading from Luke's Gospel, we heard that when Mary brought her infant son to be presented in the Temple she was warned that a sword would pierce her soul. Mothering is frequently painful, it demands sacrificial love and both Mary and Hannah show by their examples that mothering at its best should not be smothering. In order to allow the other to achieve their potential in life, to fulfil their own calling under God, be it child or disciple, we will eventually have to let them go. We may have to abandon our cherished ambitions for them, our own ideas about how

others' lives will unfold. They, and their values may not be quite the mirrors of ourselves that we had hoped for.

The second model of nurturing motherhood that we'll consider is Jerusalem. For two millennia Christians have looked to Jerusalem as 'mother'. Jerusalem as the birthplace of our faith is a spiritual magnet for pilgrims who for centuries have risked life and limb to travel there, in order to experience an umbilical connection with the cradle of Christianity. But Jerusalem has never been a roses round the door apple pie sort of place. It has forever been an uneasy melting pot of faiths, cultures, prejudices and fears. Jesus lamented over Jerusalem: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' Mtt 24:37 Even today, in that most sacred place the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the heart of Jerusalem, Christians of different denominations living together cheek by jowl are full of bitterness. Holy men and women are locked in unwinnable battles born of long-held division and suspicion. Is this really an example of motherhood that we wish to pass on to our children, our disciples? Looking to Jerusalem as mother only serves to highlight that clinging on to what we hold dear at any cost will ensure that those who follow us are themselves filled with the same prejudices and fears. We should be modelling something far more inclusive and tolerant, and we must learn from the sad story of Jerusalem that things will only change for the better if tradition is upheld, but as a river, not a rock.

A third model of motherhood we're offered as Christians is that of the mother church, which is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "The Church, considered as a mother in its functions of nourishing and protecting the believer". To understand the church as mother is to restyle our whole idea of family, because the church consists of that wonderful variety of people who hold in common their worship of God the Father, through his only Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. At its best, the church as mother offers the hope that nurture, compassion and loving acceptance are not the exclusive domain of one gender or one age group or one culture. At its best, the model of the church as mother ensures that no one is excluded from the task of making disciples, because we're all called to use our gifts to enable the flourishing of those who are our future. As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, 'Some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.' At its very best, witnessing to God's great love for creation and we his creatures, the Church will serve as an example of nurturing, loving service for the wider society.

But as we all know this idealised concept of church as the perfect example of nurture is far from the truth. We fail because we find it unpalatable to let go of our conviction that we hold the monopoly over truth. We obsess destructively about numbers, decline, sexuality, and relationships. Backs against the wall, we pursue maintenance, not ministry. Bureaucracy enervates, the Gospel should enliven.

So on this Mothering Sunday as we undertake the daunting, yet privileged task of nurturing, nourishing and mothering the next generation, where do we turn for advice? There's always Mums net, or the endless shelves of magazines and books claiming to have the answer. In our heart of hearts we know that there is no one right answer, but as people of faith we

could do worse than look forward just one week, to Passiontide and the Holy Week liturgies which lead up to Easter Day.

This short season in the liturgical year reminds us that as repentant sinners we must die to self and be reborn into the Body of Christ, a process which is described as 'redefining the ego'.

The sacrificial love of both the Virgin Mary and Hannah, the mother of the boy Samuel, reflect the sacrificial love of Christ on the cross. The sacrifice of dying to self, in order to allow others to be reconciled to God, in other words to live.

The troubled city of Jerusalem highlights the importance of dying to self-seeking individualism. Jesus came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to establish a new covenant. Tradition was upheld, but it moved on – like a river it has flowed into the next generation and the next.

Looking to the church as mother offers us the hope that by following the example of Jesus Christ, by dying to self, by getting it right, we will draw others into the Body of Christ. Through the Word of God in the Gospels we are nurtured. Through his Body on the Cross we are nourished. His death offers us life, and through the forgiveness of God we and all his children are set free. Amen.