

Sunday 27th March 2022
Lent 4 / Mothering Sunday (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 2.1-10
NT: Colossians 3.12-17
G: Luke 2.33-35

As many of you know, my mother died earlier this year. I should say at this point that this is not going to be a difficult or sentimental sermon: we didn't 'do' Mothering Sunday and this was explicitly my mother's wish. She always said that family relationships should be expressed every day in how we behaved towards each other rather than in cards or flowers, neither of which I bought her on a single occasion in the last 47 years. No – I mention her death because my siblings and I have inherited her papers, and she was a terrific and prolific chronicler of life. Her notes on her childhood are a vivid picture of life in the 1940s and 1950s – perhaps the most comic being her description of the washing habits of every member of her family, the paragraph on her brother being the shortest because, in her words, “washing played an insignificant part of his life.”

But the picture of her relationship with her mother was one of love and affection, but also the distance which a generational and educational divide sadly necessitates. She wrote this of her mother's relationship with her and her brother: “*He would say that I was more valued because I was clever and well behaved at school. But the strange thing is that I actually felt that my mother held my academic successes against me.*” Well, it goes on, and actually encapsulates every sibling feeling about that slight rivalry for affection. As a parent, of course, one knows that none of this is true: children are equally and separately loved. She knew that.

My mother's writings and the letters are an eight-decade picture of relationships: often

funny, sometimes sad. This is the pattern of all our lives and perhaps the gritty reality of Mothering Sunday. Our Gospel reading today is very short, but on a day which the world has turned into a secular feast of chocolate and sentimentality, the reading we heard is rather stark and brutal. Mary and Joseph have brought the infant Jesus to the Temple after his birth and Simeon gives the prophecy that Jesus was destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, but he adds the sting in the tail as he says to Mary that “a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Well, this is it really. Let us not over-sentimentalize this relationship which can be so very close, but is also inevitably the cause of distress. Any kind of love is laying yourself open to hurt, and a mother-child relationship is no different. The love which Mary had for Jesus meant only pain when she saw him on the cross, and this was at the heart of Simeon’s prediction in today’s reading.

This is the pattern of all our lives and it is a mirror to God. Now, there is something a bit nebulous in saying that we see God or understand him in our human relationships, and so I use advisedly the word ‘mirror’ in the way that relationships reveal God. Mirrors rarely reflect a perfect reality, and human relationships are not, as some have maintained, an imperfect manifestation of an ideal, but rather they are a reflection of our aspiration towards God. However, we also know that human relationships are not right, and there is a brokenness in our lives.

There is a long tradition of articulating ‘relationship’ as being symptomatic of the human condition. You will all know those famous lines from John Donne:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;*

A simple meaning, that we cannot live in isolation. We don’t really need to explore this any

more, because it is self-evident not just from our experience of family (which can be both good and bad), but also from the spiritual experience of reaching out into a world where we know we are not the centre. Our experience of God tells us that we are created into a knowledge of relationship with him. There is no such thing as 'becoming a Christian': it is an heretical phrase if we believe that we are created by a loving God, because, like the love which a parent has for a child, which knows no favouritism or division, God loves each of us.

The real question is how we live in relationship. In our second reading from Colossians, St Paul writes, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another." This is the picture of relationship: underpinned by a love which cannot go away, it is about an aspiration which will not always be met. The injunction to clothe yourself with compassion and kindness slightly presupposes that it does not always come naturally. We must bear with one another.

Mothering Sunday is not necessarily about mothers in particular, because there is no uniformity in those relationships, but it is about those who act as a mother to us, and that might be different people at different stages of your life. It might be someone different now from in previous years, but the mothering role is taken by the person who cares for you unconditionally, and who reaches out with compassion, kindness and patience whenever you are in need. In turn, it is likely that each of us does, or could, act as a mother for others. A relationship of care and nurture is therefore a gift which we both give and receive, but it is not always an evenly balanced relationship. On the one hand, the maternal role requires an absolute acceptance of the other; on the other hand the person to whom the love is given is often aspiring to offer the compassion, kindness and patience. This is not modelled on God,

but a reflection of what we see in him: the unquestioning love offered by him, matched by our aspiration to live up to that unconditional surrender.

But remember again my mother's memoir of sibling rivalry, thinking that something was expected of her to live up to a mother's love. It was not true, of course, and she knew it, but it is a feeling we all know and it has often been the emotion which religion has manipulated to suggest that you have to behave in a certain way for God to love you. God's love is unconditional and is unaltered by your choices and actions. It is a theological error to think that we can change God, and yet those who preach that human behaviour can change God's love are suggesting just that. Learn from the love of a parent that our mistakes in life do not alter God's love for us.

Two years ago when the pandemic was just getting going, Mothering Sunday was one of the first victims, but here at St Nick's we took bunches of daffodils around to members of the congregation by car because they could not come to church. The flowers were a gesture of the love which we each expressed for each other at a time when we could not be with each other. We shall pass around flowers again at the end of this service and in themselves they do not represent anything, but the way in which they are presented is without question or hesitation. The love which we give to those closest to us, those who act as mother to us, or those for whom we give that parental care, that love should be without division because to give and receive that love is to be human.

Fr Crispin Pailing