

Sunday 10 March 2024
The Fourth Sunday of Lent
Mothering Sunday

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Numbers 21:4-9

NT: Ephesians 2:1-10

Gp: John 3: 14-21

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent, known as Laetare Sunday when the church expresses hope in the midst of our Lenten fasts and increased prayer life. It is also Mothering Sunday. It's a day to celebrate all those who are special to us and a chance to say thank you. Rather than waiting for the bunch of flowers to arrive on our doorstep, perhaps we should consider the people we could deliver a small posy of thanks to today, which might look like a prayer, a phone call or a text message.

In the lead up to Mothering Sunday, when shops begin to display 'Mother's Day' cards and flowers, my thoughts turn as always to mothers. I think of those whose mothers have died and are grieving their loss. There are other types of grief that also come to the surface on a day like Mothering Sunday. For those unable to have children, for those who have lost children before or after birth, for those who have been victims of abuse, or separated from family. Today is intended to be a day of celebration, but we need to acknowledge the pain which today can bring.

It was International Women's Day on Friday and I want to celebrate women today. But I also want to celebrate them every day! In addition to this, I want to celebrate men too every day. I want to celebrate those who are non-binary every day. But in particular today, I want to celebrate the fully inclusive love of God. Today is a day called 'Mothering Sunday' not just for the people we want to celebrate, but for the God who is the ultimate mother and father to us all, and for the church we are called to be.

In our Gospel passage today we heard Jesus say: *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'.*

These words are familiar, and we may have heard them several times. What does Jesus

actually mean? I believe that Jesus means everyone who knows and loves him will be able to have a relationship with him and be with him for eternity. I believe God wants this for all people. For all people to know him and to love him.

To try and understand this all-encompassing love of God, the familiar passage that I ask you to think about is the prodigal son. In this story we are shown the pain and the joy of God's unending love for us. In the parable of the prodigal son, a man has two sons and the younger of them asks for his inheritance. He goes out and enjoys a lavish lifestyle until he has spent all of the money, and he ends up penniless and feeding pigs. He realised that he needed to return to his father, seek his forgiveness and return to the fold. When the younger son was still far off, the father ran to him and kissed him and called for a great celebration, which included eating a fatted calf. This angered the elder son as he had stayed and worked the land with his father, and he was indignant that his father had never even given him a goat to share with his friends. The father said to him, *'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found'*.

In this parable we learn about God who is mother and father to us, who watches as we turn away and abuse the gifts which are lavished upon us. We hear of a God waiting at the end of the road for our return. It tells of a God who does not greet our return with judgement but with celebration and takes us in his open and loving arms. A lovely quote I have seen on social media is: God says, just come home - he's saying that to all of us.

There is a beautiful painting by Rembrandt entitled, 'The Return of the Prodigal Son', which shows a scene of an old man blessing his son who is kneeling at his feet, with hands on his shoulders. This painting provides a source of reflection for Henri Nouwen in his book, 'A Story of Homecoming' (1994). As Nouwen spends time with the painting he describes something he gradually notices.

“It all began with the hands. The two are quite different. The father’s left hand touching the son’s shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal son’s shoulder and back. I can see a certain pressure, especially with the thumb. That hand seems not only to touch, but, with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father’s left hand touches the son, it is not without a firm grip.

How different is the father’s right hand! This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender. The fingers are close to each other, and they have an elegant quality. It lies gently upon the son’s shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother’s hand. As soon as I recognised the difference between the two hands of the father, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds, and she caresses. He confirms and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present.”

I concur with this view from Henri Nouwen but also believe that God is beyond gender and their extravagant, all-encompassing love is beyond our human understanding. As we are part way through Lent and will be soon preparing for the events of Holy Week and the Passion of Our Lord, we think of Our Lady Mary. Our Lady Mary provides a model for love. She was present at the crucifixion of her son, Jesus. She was there stood near to the cross and the Gospel of John tells us that when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing together, he said: “*“Woman here is your son’.* Then he said to the disciple, *‘here is your mother.’*” Jesus made provision for his mother. Saint John Paul II said: *‘The care of a mother embraces her child totally. Mary’s motherhood has its beginning in her motherly care for Christ. In Christ, at the foot of the cross, she accepted John, and in John she accepted all of us totally’.*

These examples of love as demonstrated by the father in the prodigal son story, by Jesus in his passion, by God in sending his Son to us, by Our Lady Mary in her love for Jesus, John and all of us, give us profound illustrations of love. How do we echo that love of God, as people together, in the place and as the people called church? Holding firmly as well as offering consolation and comfort. As the world turns its back on love for neighbours, ignoring the cries of the hungry, the refugees and the poor, and squandering the gifts of our natural world and endless suffering from wars and conflict, how do we show the mothering, fathering love of God?

We had a quiet morning yesterday, a chance to stop and be still part way through Lent. It was an opportunity to spend time in the Lord's presence and to reflect on our journey with him leading up to Holy week and Easter. I think it would be good for everyone to have a quiet time, a time of reflection. To have a time to think about your journey with Jesus to the cross. On this journey, how can you be more loving, more inclusive and more giving?

So on this Mothering Sunday, Laetare Sunday and Fourth Sunday of Lent, let us ask ourselves in the light of this incredible story which Jesus tells us in the Gospel passage. God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten son for us, so that we may enter into a relationship with him for eternity. Also, as illustrated in the incredible parable of the prodigal son, can we accept for ourselves this love freely and extravagantly offered to us? More importantly, can we echo and share this love of God to a world in desperate need of extravagant love without bounds or measure.

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