

Sunday 30 March 2025
The Fourth Sunday of Lent
Mothering Sunday

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 2.1-10

NT: Colossians 3.12-17

Gp: Luke 2.33-35

Our readings today provide us with stories involving different kinds of women and mothers. When we think of the mother of Moses in our first reading today, we think of a woman whose experience is very close to a lot of women in the world today. She endures the despair that can overtake people who cannot give themselves or those closest to them what they most need, the compassion, freedom and justice to nourish their children. We think, in other words, of a kind of injustice which then, just as now, is too widespread for comfort.

Then, we think of how the daughter of Pharaoh responds. She does what is NOT expected of her. Somehow the daughter of Pharaoh knows that at times what is expected of you can indeed cripple you and others. You are surrounded by expectations: this is all you can do, and you can never make a difference. You are expected to take or do what you are told, and you are to put up with it all. The Church, as you and I know too well, is also guilty of saying often to us as individuals and to others, 'put up with it', just as the position in which the daughter of Pharaoh found herself in; 'you must take what comes to you'. The daughter of Pharaoh does, however, what nobody expects. She steps out and she grabs hold of Moses, the one who will lead his people to freedom; although she is unlikely to have known what the full implications of her actions were.

I am always fascinated by how full the Bible is of noisy, embarrassing women, who step out and lay claim to something (think of the woman in Mark 5 who against all the odds grabs Jesus' cloak to seek healing). So, there is one thing for us to think about: stepping out, not being imprisoned by what is expected of us, but being able to see where hope is and going for it and laying claim to it.

Whilst our readings for Mothering Sunday direct us to think of mothers and women facing unexpected scenarios, the tradition of Mothering Sunday was a celebration when everyone went to their mother church, to the place where they were nurtured, loved and formed into the body of Christ. As we gather here in this church on this day, we ask "How do we get the courage to face the reality around us and to act on it in the manner of the women we heard about in our readings today?". Most of the time, me included, we try to make reality fit our preferences and our self-directed hopes. But the clue lies, as it often does with the story of our Lady Mary in Luke's Gospel; we are told in Luke's first chapters that it is the Holy Spirit that brings God's agenda over human planning and understanding, not us.

Mary does not know exactly what is in store for her as mother of the Saviour, and she feels frightened – with good reason, it seems, as Simeon tells her that a sword of suffering will go through her soul. Nonetheless, the Spirit catches her up into a new world, even before she has time to think it through. Luke's gospel reminds us that it is the Spirit that allows us to have this kind of courage in facing reality and acting accordingly. It is the same Spirit, you might say, that helped Pharaoh's daughter to act in that way; indeed, all of the women we face today in our readings practice mothering in different ways. Yet, they are all clothed with the gifts of the Spirit that Paul speaks about in the letter to the Colossians: compassion, kindness, humility and patience.

Earlier in the week we celebrated the feast of the Annunciation, the patronal festival of the city of Nazareth, the city where I was born – I am sure you have heard of it. And there is an apocryphal story about that event which tells of Gabriel coming to Mary at the well in Nazareth, scaring her away. Because she is weak and humble, not knowing who this man was, she runs to her home. Gabriel of course does not leave her but runs after her. (perhaps such stories shaped the various depictions of the Annunciation, either at the Well or in a house). The point remains however that the Spirit of God is taking over; it will not leave her.

We look at the world around us and see a great deal of selfishness and untruthfulness that have the effect of blocking our vision of other people and leave us and them in the darkness of our fantasies and fears. But on this Mothering Sunday, we are reminded that it is the Spirit that brings liberty and the vision of hope as Paul speaks of in this morning's epistle, and these gifts of the Spirit characterised the women of our readings today and allowed them to act with courage and steadfastness. After all, this is also the kind of fasting that the prophets spoke of. Real fasting, Isaiah tells us, is breaking the bonds of injustice and sharing our resources. It's fasting because it is denying ourselves the pleasure of thinking of ourselves as isolated human beings with no real relations with those around us; denying the fantasy that you can organise the world to suit yourself; denying the luxury of not noticing the suffering of your neighbour. This is the fasting that reconnects with reality. That is the example of the motherhood of today's readings.

Compare this with today's politics: our world has more rapid communication than ever, yet we seem less able to see and face reality that is there in front of us. So much of our national life is devoted to protecting fantasies and denials. Whole nations behave as if they were alone in the world, despite international law... (Russia and Israel/Palestine, the challenge of trans-national Islamism). Oppressive and brutal governments work to keep themselves in power, whether in the Middle East, Turkey, Africa, Russia, or elsewhere while turning their nations into paupers. They all see with Pharaoh's eyes refusing to let the Hebrews go, so to speak.

But we have gathered here at this altar to pray for the gift of the Spirit upon all 'flesh', not just on us. Indeed, to seek God's agenda, we need to work with anyone whose eyes are open to the reality before them; for they too have something of that Spirit. We have the gift of Baptism and so we pray to God as Jesus did; we are drawn to the Body of Christ. We are united not to an NGO, or simply a political party, but to a community and a communion that makes us in the words of Paul today: 'Bear one another', 'forgive each other'. We cannot talk about our welfare without thinking of others. In that sense, the Church is our mother. The Spirit makes Mary greater than she could have imagined and we come to receive Mary's son in bread and wine and pray for that gift of his Spirit, the gift of integrity and realism day after day that we may truly be the Mother Church for this nation too – hoping, praying and working for the revival of our cherished Church of England.

Fr Yazid Said