

Sunday 15 March 2026
The Fourth Sunday of Lent
Mothering Sunday

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 2:1-10

NT: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Gp: Luke 2:33-35

With the possible exception of trying to explain the nature of the Trinity on Trinity Sunday, Mothering Sunday is perhaps the most difficult of all sermons, particularly for a male priest, but difficult as it may be for me to preach, Mothering Sunday is a very difficult day for a significant proportion of our congregation. I have no doubt that there are many sitting here for whom Mothering Sunday, or Mother's Day as the secular world knows it, is full of sorrow and sadness.

Those mothers whose children have died or those who have experienced miscarriage, many of us who have lost our own mothers, or whose relationship with their mother is strained or broken, those whose relationship with their child is strained or broken, or who feel unwanted and unneeded by their grown-up family.

Others will be heartbroken because, for one reason or another, they have never had the children they longed for. There will be single parents, who have struggled to raise a family in a society and church that judged and abandoned them. And those who have no children (whether they chose it or not) may feel excluded and less honoured than those who have.

Did you know that the two women who created Mother's Day never had any children of their own? Anna Jarvis organised the first in America in 1908 after the death of her own mother. Inspired by this but wary of importing American culture, Constance Adelaide Smith campaigned in Britain in 1914 for the return of the medieval tradition of Mothering Sunday where Christians would make a pilgrimage to their 'mother church', which might be the local cathedral, or the place where they were baptised. For those who lived away from their families, such as those in service or live-in apprentices, this was a rare opportunity to visit their parents and bring them gifts. And yet, these festivals were never as universally joyful as Ms Smith believed. Even in their medieval incarnation, parishes often got into brawls over who should go first in the procession. A 13th Century Bishop of Lincoln had to threaten punishments because of these fights.

In America, Anna Jarvis was so distraught by the commercialisation of Mother's Day that she called for its abandonment in 1943, declaring that "a printed card means nothing except you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world". Commercialism won though, because five years later the greetings card companies honoured her by paying for her funeral.

Into this context it is important to acknowledge all this history, this suffering and regret, all this yearning and longing and loss that remains hidden and unknown to our friends, sometimes even to our families, and almost certainly to the church. And to find the right words to say, to comfort and console, while also celebrating the joy that parenthood can bring, the welcome and love and

acceptance and gratitude that families are able to offer one another, whether we are families of blood or chosen families of friendship or faith.

Today we are confronted by a poignant and moving moment in Luke's gospel narrative. It is one which reveals Mary, the suffering mother, who is forever alongside her son. His death is implicitly yet cryptically foretold from the start by Simeon, and her involvement at the end and afterwards is foreshadowed in these ominous words. These few lines are the source and inspiration of the pieta – the grieving mother cradling her child. Not only does that resonate painfully with our experience of loving and letting go, but it also reflects the depth of God's love for us. Simeon has uttered words of universal salvation – and also the cost of this for mother and son.

It is a sobering reading for Mothering Sunday. It foreshadows Jesus' suffering and death; it expresses the cost of love which liberates us from our pride, selfishness and human tendency to get things wrong. Jesus bears the cost and restores our dignity so that we may share his risen life. Mary – is the Church's perfect icon of motherhood. Mary who said yes to God when so many had said no. Mary whom the Orthodox call 'Theotokos' meaning literally 'mother of God'. Mary who accepts shame, rejection, and discomfort, just to reach the point of giving birth. Mary who must become an asylum seeker in Egypt to escape king Herod's wrath. Mary who triggers the first of Jesus' miracles at the wedding at Cana by refusing to take a no from her divine Son. Mary whom Jesus later apparently ignores, telling his followers that his family are those who do the will of God, not those related by blood. Mary who is still there nevertheless at the Cross, long after Joseph has passed away, willing to endure the suffering of watching her son die, when so many of Jesus' friends and disciples and brothers and sisters were nowhere to be seen.

Did Mary receive comfort and consolation for her broken heart? Well, Mary's sister was there with her. The unnamed 'beloved disciple' was also at the cross, who in a way also represents us, so that when Jesus says to him "Here is your mother", she becomes – as the Catholics strongly believe - a mother to us all. And so, for Mary there is a transition from being a mother by blood to Jesus, to being a mother to the whole family of believers. And then, following Jesus' Way, the family of Abraham, the Jewish faith, expands to include the new Christians of Greek and Roman culture, and beyond that, even right to our own English shores.

Even so, the pain and suffering of being part of a family continues. For the early Christians there are persecutions, disagreements, schisms, and martyrdoms. Paul the Apostle falls out with just about everyone, including people from the churches he has founded. And yet he reminds us in today's letter to the church in Corinth that 'the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God'. In the midst of the brutality of his time, Paul is describing God's consoling love as a model for a community or family of love.

This is the point of Church – to be a family of vulnerability and authenticity that acknowledges and shares in one another's suffering – to which not one of us are strangers – and to console one another in our pain; to weep with those who weep, and mourn with those who mourn, and, of course, rejoice with those who rejoice. And on this Mothering Sunday, surely there will be some of us who have reason to do all of these at once.

Too often I think there is a temptation for churches to become places of stiff-upper lips, of hidden distress, where you have to pretend to be fine when someone asks you how you are. But Mother Church must not be like that. Mother church must be somewhere we can look each other in the face, speak of our afflictions and know that we will find compassion and consolation. Mother church must be a school of compassion, love and consolation, not of conformity and pretence. To speak of “Mother Church” is a mothering Church; “Mother Church” means each one of us living as disciples with and for one another.

Jesus was God with us: in birth, in life and in death. His mother too will bear the suffering and pain in an intensely intimate way. Yet it is in his death on the cross, that love is most fully shown in selflessness and self-giving. Only that generosity can bring forgiveness and healing and renewed hope. Indeed, a new life springs up for us.

Today is a day, whatever our experience of mothers, whatever our disappointments and hopes for motherhood, to be embraced once more by the love and grace of God. In the words of Scripture, in the sharing of peace, in the gifts of the Eucharist we catch a glimpse of God’s generous and transforming love. Through us, that same love pours out into the world. We share the burdens, heart breaks, joys and hopes for transformation in all that we do and are. As individuals, and as a community, we all share the birth pangs of God’s Kingdom.

Fr Bill Addy