

Mothering Sunday 22nd March 2020

God of compassion, whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary, shared the life of a home in Nazareth: strengthen us each day, that in joy and sorrow we may know your presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Exodus 2:1-10

Luke 2:33-35

These lectionary readings for Mothering Sunday emphasise sorrow and grief which may hugely reflect how we feel given our current worldwide situation. In desperate times mothers fear for their children's safety. We all worry about children, parents, family, friends, strangers too. Both readings highlighting the role of female characters in the working out of God's plan. Behind the great figures of Moses and Jesus, there are the heroic lives of brave and resourceful women.

Moses rescued the people of Israel from enslavement and oppression in Egypt and led them out towards the Promised Land but at the start of his life he needed to be rescued himself. His life was in danger through the ethnic cleansing policy of the Egyptians who felt themselves threatened by the growing population of the Hebrew underclass. The child Moses depended on the sharp-witted and decisive actions of three people who rescued him from imminent danger.

1. Moses's mother feared for the life of her new baby and used desperate measures to try to ensure he survived. She used her intelligence and skill to hide him whilst risking crocodiles. Her anguish at the prospect of never seeing him again or knowing what happened to him is temporarily relieved by being able to nurse him until he was weaned at around five years old.
2. The Egyptian princess instantly and instinctively had compassion on the baby that she found, rescued him, arranged for his care and eventually adopted him.
3. His sister stood at a distance to watch and bravely came forward with her bold and risky proposal.

None of these women is named. The story is about how God protected the child and did so through these women whose names no one recorded.

Now, as always, children need care from many people. Biological parents are hugely important, but others also have a role in bringing up a child. The story is very relevant for people who care for children who are not their own – those who have adopted or fostered (like the princess) or taken on the care of grandchildren or other family members. But there are so many others who raise children too, including you and me as the family of the church. The love, patience and appropriate discipline we offer forms an important part of the child's upbringing. We give thanks to God for all who do this work whether or not their work is recognised or their names recorded.

Luke's story of the presentation in the Temple combines joy with sadness and foreboding. Simeon and Anna are holy people seeking God's promised consolation. Despite having seen many parents bring their babies to the Temple to do what the law

of Moses required, they somehow knew this child was different. He is a light of revelation to the Gentiles as well as the glory of God's people Israel. Salvation will have a wide embrace but there is a darker side. This passage focuses on Mary as 'the mother of sorrows', as Simeon prophesies the events of the Passion, and beyond. Jesus brings division within his own people; he is destined for 'rising' (the same word as for 'resurrection') as well as 'falling'. He will tear the history of Israel apart. Israelites will be judged, or rather they will judge themselves, by their response to him. Their inner selves will be revealed. His mother will also experience suffering. She will be, as it were, pierced by a sword because of him. She too will need consolation.

Mary's life was far from easy. Matthew suggests her pregnancy was a disgrace and following the birth, he also tells of the threat to the child's life and the flight into Egypt. In Luke we read Simeon's prophecy of conflict and suffering. Later, when the family visits Jerusalem for the Passover, the twelve-year-old Jesus stays behind to talk with the teachers in the temple. Mary is hurt and angered by his apparent thoughtlessness and bewildered by his reference to the temple as his 'Father's house'. When he begins his ministry, he seems to turn his back on his family, refusing to see his mother and brothers when they come to find him. He teaches the priority of discipleship over family ties. Hurt and confusion re-surface: at one point they think he is out of his mind. Yet whatever her private thoughts and feelings, Mary remains loyal to her son. John identifies her as being among the women who were standing near the foot of the cross. And so the sword pierces Mary's heart as she watches her son suffer and die.

Most mothers (and all who care for others) will be able to identify with some of Mary's experiences. Across the world, women and children are particularly vulnerable in situations of war or conflict. Many who have sought refuge or asylum amongst us have fled from soldiers intent on massacre, or seen family members arrested, tortured and killed. For those in more stable environments, the cost of caring may seem less extreme, but it is still experienced intensely, perhaps especially at the moment. God's people constantly find their expectations and confidence challenged. Yet God is with us, around us and within us, and salvation and consolation are ours.

The origins of Mothering Sunday are unclear. Celebrated in Britain at least since the sixteenth century, it was originally a day when domestic servants (many very young) were given a day off to visit their families. One reason was the custom of whole families visiting their 'mother church'.

Ruth Burrows, the Carmelite nun and writer on spirituality says, 'Many of us see the church...like an insulated, armoured, electrified carriage in which we can sit behind curtained windows as we hurtle through the dark forests. We don't have to see the frightening forms outside, don't have to see the abysses into which we might drop...we can hurtle along safely to heaven.' She contrasts this with 'the true experience of faith' which involves risk and effort. For her, the church is more like 'a frail boat tossed like a cockle shell on the waves with not a chance of survival in itself. Only the presence of the Lord is security'...

The image of the Church as a mother helps us to see beyond the human building and organisation. The Church is the means by which Christ supports and nourishes us in

our faith. even when we cannot meet for worship our church is secure, for we are still the people of God faithfully loving, caring and praying. God is powerfully present.

Thanks be to God.

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord,
if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain;
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?

I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?

Daniel L. Schutte (b. 1947)

Prayers for Mothering Sunday

Pray for mothers, fathers and carers across the world who are separated from their children because of war, natural disaster or human actions.

Pray for families who have become estranged because of differences of perspective or opinion.

Pray for mothers (and other carers) who are struggling with the burden of providing for their family, especially in the uncertainty caused by the Coronavirus outbreak with the closure of schools, threat to employment and difficulties in finding food and other supplies in the shops.

Pray for yourself, your family and those you love and are concerned for at this time.

The Lord hears our prayer. Thanks be to God.