

Sermon for Mothering Sunday – 27th March 2022

1 Samuel 1: 20 – end, John 19:25-27

The church calls today Mothering Sunday, the secular world calls it Mother's Day.

Mother's **Day** seems to be a time where we are expected, or at least encouraged, to shower one person with cards and flowers and gifts. There's nothing wrong with that of course, but the church's preference for 'Mothering **Sunday**' implies a far more inclusive approach.

It allows for the possibility that **mothering** may be – and frequently is - more than simply a biological relationship.

For me, and I'm sure for others here today, I no longer have an earthly mother – Does that make Mothering Sunday irrelevant for me? Maybe it's now my turn to be showered with cards and flowers or even breakfast in bed....but then again – it's not all about me and my kids now live miles away anyway!

What about those who neither have a mother nor children of their own?

Surely church cannot exclude people on Mothering Sunday?

So, Mothering Sunday must be about more than biological mothers. As Christian we know that word 'Mothering', has a wider meaning. Mothering in its fuller sense means loving, caring, and nurturing. And loving, caring, and nurturing is something we all should be doing, whether we're a mother or not! So today, we **do** acknowledge the biological mothers we have, or have had and give thanks for them, but I would like us to consider more widely this concept of mothering.

I have three models of 'mothering' from the bible and let's see if we can all grow, in our ability, individually and, as a church to mother one another, to love, care and nurture each other, better.

The first model I bring you is the traditional **Biblical model of motherhood** - the loving and caring model which encourages other people, and puts **their** best interest above our own. We think of Moses's mother, - who knows her name?... Jochebed, as recorded in Exodus 6:20. [Miriam was Moses's sister...] We remember Jochebed putting her son in a basket and hiding him in the reeds of the Nile. We remember Hannah giving her long-awaited son, Samuel to the service of the Lord and the model of motherhood is seen pre-eminently in Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We don't know very much about Mary - she's mentioned by name less than 20 times in the Bible. But we do know, that she accepted God's call on her life, and accepted the role she would have in raising her son. She was told right from his infancy that, both she and her son, would suffer ... and yet she trusted God. When Mary brought her infant son to be presented in the Temple, she was warned that a sword would pierce her soul. And in our reading from John, we hear of Mary standing at the foot of the cross, looking on, as her son was cruelly crucified. And being told that she was now to be the mother somebody else. Can you imagine how Mary must have felt, seeing her son on that cross? Heart-wrenching. But she, like Moses' mother and Hannah before her, trustingly, committed her Son into God's hands.

Mothering, as many of you will know, is frequently painful.

It demands a sacrificial love, that puts the needs of others and the plans of God first.

And these wonderful Biblical mothers knew that mothering should not be smothering! They knew they had to let their son's find their own God-given path. Jochebed trusted God had a plan for her son Moses, Hannah trusted her son to Eli... And Mary, heart-broken Mary, knew God had a greater purpose, as she saw her son die on the cross.

For us, if we see this from a 'mothering' perspective, which we are all called to do, we see that their focus, their innermost longing, was to ensure God's will for their son's lives was done.

For us, we too are called to do likewise, not just for our children, but for all God's children.

Our call is to disciple others in God's ways. To enable others to achieve their potential in life, to fulfil their own God-given calling. To love them sacrificially and unconditionally, to nurture them, and disciple them and then...and then to let them go.

We may have to abandon our own cherished ambitions for them, our own ideas about how others' lives will unfold.

I mentored a young lad for several years. He had a difficult childhood, and we spent many an hour studying scripture and talking through difficult situations. He gave his life to God at the age of 15. His path has now gone a different way, but I trust him to God. I went to his wedding 2 years ago, just before Covid began and celebrated his marriage to his new husband. I needed to let go of my thoughts and aspirations for him and trust God... who richly blessed him and has his own path for him – and God's path is always a better way.

We are called to love others sacrificially, not to impose our hopes and aspirations on them but to encourage, nurture and help others develop in the way God has for them.

Who are you 'mothering' at the moment? Who are you discipling? Who are you helping to grow in their Christian walk?

Maybe, you feel you are not good enough to disciple anyone, because you don't know enough about the faith we follow, then will you consider going on an Alpha course? It's an excellent way of grounding your faith and asking those difficult questions in a safe environment before someone else asks you!

If you know your faith but have never disciplined anyone before – be bold – invest some time in someone, getting to know them, caring for them and ask them how their walk with God is at the moment and suggest you get together to read through the book of Mark or another Gospel.

Mothering by walking with others, discipling others and helping them discern God's will for their lives – setting them on the path God has determined. That is a job for us all – and not just for the ladies! As Matthew 28 says...go and make disciples...that is not a suggestion, it's a command!

So, I ask again, who are you discipling?

The second model of mother, I bring you this morning is '**Jerusalem**'.

For two thousand years, Christians have looked to Jerusalem as 'mother'. Jerusalem as the birthplace of our faith. Pilgrims have been drawn to Jerusalem in order to experience the origin, the source, the centre from which our faith grew. Allan and I had the privileged of visit Jerusalem a number of years ago and there is something about, walking where Jesus walked and standing near the massive stones of the temple that connects you to mother Jerusalem, the birthplace of our faith.

But Jerusalem has never been peaceful place. It has forever been an uneasy melting pot of faiths, cultures, prejudices and fears. We remember Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,' Matthew 24:37 . Jesus longing to mother the home city of Jerusalem.

But should we really look to Jerusalem and call it mother?

Even today, in a most sacred place the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the heart of Jerusalem, Christians of different denominations have their own different areas in the church. Holy men and women locked in their long-held traditions which brings both division and suspicion. Is this really an example of motherhood that we wish to pass on to our children, or our disciples?

Looking to Jerusalem as mother only serves to highlight that clinging on to what we hold dear at any cost will ensure that those who follow us are themselves filled with the same prejudices and fears. We should be modelling something far more inclusive and tolerant, and we must learn from the sad story of Jerusalem that things will only change for the better if traditions are upheld as a river, not a boulder. What do I mean by this? We all have our own traditions, the way we have always done things, the way we like to do things. And traditions are important, they ground us and make sure we don't do off track.

But as Jesus came not to abolish traditions, Jesus didn't come to abolish the law, but to establish a new covenant. A new way. Tradition was upheld but it moved on. Interpreted in a different way. Interpreted through the Jesus lens of love and forgiveness.

No more ritual sacrifices, Jesus has fulfilled that once and for all. No more the priest being the only one who could enter God's presence – the curtain has been torn in two to allow us all to have access to God.

As we go through a time of change here at St Paul with All Saints, we need to grapple with what God's will is for his church here. Can we hold firm to the Gospel, whilst flowing with the changes God enables, through each generation?

So, Jerusalem as mother, teaching us to be gathered up, in the arms of Jesus, and to learn to change in the way **He** asks us to change. To allow his Spirit to flow like a river, through this church and ensure that we do not put blocks in his way.

A third and final model of motherhood I offer this morning is that of the **Mother Church**, which is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "The Church, considered as a mother in its functions of nourishing and protecting the believer".

To understand the church as mother is to restyle our whole idea of family, because the church consists of that wonderful variety of people who hold in common their worship of God the Father, through his only Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. One church, one body, working together for the benefit of all.

At its best, the church as mother, offers the hope that nurture, compassion, and loving acceptance are not the exclusive domain of one gender or one age group or one culture. ALL are welcome.

At its best, the model of the church as mother, ensures that no one is excluded from the task of making disciples, because we're all called to use our gifts to enable the flourishing of those who are our future. As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, 'Some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ...why?...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the **building up** of the body of Christ.' We are all called. Do you know this? What is your calling?

At its very best, witnessing to God's great love, the Church will serve as an example of nurturing, loving service for the wider community.

But as we all know, this idealised concept of church as the perfect example of nurture is far from the truth. But let's make it a priority. If someone is **unwell**, keep in touch – don't assume someone else will do John 19 that. If there is need for **volunteers** to help say the lunch-club or children's work or at the Praise party – don't assume someone else will step forward.

We all have our part to play in nurturing and supporting the work of the church.

I can't remember who said it, but church should be seen as a battleship not a cruiser. We all need to have all hands-on deck and there is no room for those who are here to be pampered. We all need to play our part.

This season of Lent, as Brian reminded us, last week, is a time of reflection and repentance. A time of turning away from selfish things and a turning back, to all that is good and holy. A turning back to God.

And so, as we approach Holy Week and Easter, we remember the **sacrificial love** of Jochebed, Hannah and Mary, which reflects the sacrificial love of Christ on the cross. The sacrifice of dying to self, in order to allow others to be reconciled to God,

We are called to disciple others, to actively show others the way of Jesus.

The **troubled city of Jerusalem** highlights the importance of dying to self-seeking individualism. Jesus came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to establish a new covenant where the promised Holy Spirit flows like a river unheeded by manmade traditions.

Looking to the **church as mother**, offers us the hope that by following the example of Jesus Christ, by dying to self, by offering love, hope and inclusivity to others, we will shine God's light into our community draw people into the Body of Christ.

Who are you going to disciple?

Who are you going to help grow in their faith?

I will happily run and Alpha course after Easter if that would be helpful for anyone.

I will be running a confirmation classes in June in preparation for Bishop Simon confirming those who wish to make that commitment. There will be a service in July.

Let us all commit to mothering God's people, caring and nurturing others, and drawing them into His kingdom.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen.