

Beverley Minster 10.30am Sunday 26th March 2017 Mothering Sunday

Readings: Exodus 2:1-10 : Psalm 127 : Colossians 3:12-17 : Luke 2:33-35

Today is 'Mothers' Day'. This event is now well established in a wider, secular context but its roots in England are in the 17th century when servants were given the time on the fourth Sunday in Lent to return to their Mother Church. It became traditional for them to pick flowers on their way to give to their own mothers. Then it was known as 'Mothering Sunday' and is still known as this within the church. Especially today we remember our mothers and give thanks, but the church's title makes it necessary to reflect on the wider meaning of 'mothering'. The Cambridge Dictionary defines this as "the process of caring for children as their mother,...". Beverley Jullien, Chief of the Mothers' Union, comments that whilst this acknowledges the very special relationship between a mother and her child, it also embraces today's reality, where the lead carer could equally be a single father, a grandparent, or someone in the wider family or community.

Mothering is not the unique preserve of mothers. The church's understanding of mothering is that the process is not dependent upon the inheritance or the biological link. Further that definition of 'mothering' goes beyond the caring for children to "caring for people as a mother does", and this quite naturally, without expecting thanks, or even recognising that what is done is special. Beverley Jullien tells us it is important, especially on Mothering Sunday, that we take time to celebrate and thank all those who work in ways great and small to help others. As an example, she talks about providing sustenance and a listening ear through the "ministry of the tea urn" in hospitals, prisons and parishes. It's what motherers do. Come and have a cuppa and tell me all about it. There might even be cake... Their love is unconditional, and they do the will of God.

In Jesus' ministry, he distances himself from the controlling part of the relationship between parent and child when his family pay him a visit. From Mark chapter 3:

'Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.'³³ And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'

Now this is perhaps quite hurtful. It's uncomfortable for a parent to hear their own offspring publicly downgrade their special relationship. But, as usual, Jesus' next words get to the heart of the matter. *'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'* So if you, as parents, are doing the will of God then you are true kindred not only of your own, but also of the Lord. [Mk 3:31-35]

What Jesus is pointing out here is that Mothering is not 'Smothering'. We have to let our children go so they can be themselves and develop into full human beings in their own right. It is quite wrong to think of our children as extensions of ourselves, born to do our bidding.

The story of Moses in the basket demonstrates that his mother recognised just that. She did not cling to her child but trusted in God and the child was spared to become the one who led the Israelites out of slavery and towards the Promised Land. In the previous chapter of Exodus, the Egyptian Pharaoh has given the hideous command to his soldiers that all male

babies born to the Hebrew women shall be thrown into the Nile. This after the Hebrew midwives cleverly defied Pharaoh's attempt to get them to murder the infants by claiming that these 'vigorous' Hebrew women gave birth before they had chance to arrive. Moses' mother bore 'a fine baby' and, understandably not wanting to have him taken from her, hid him until she could hide him no longer. Presumably when the soldiers were doing their rounds again she thought to put him in a basket, waterproofed with tar and pitch, and float him in the water by the edge of the Nile, in among the reeds. We don't know whether or not she knew that this was the place where Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe, but on that day, as the story unfolds, this powerful and well-connected young woman spots the child in the basket and takes it upon herself to mother him. She doesn't do it herself, of course. She asks for a nurse. The twist in the plot is that Moses' sister is standing by on the bank and unbeknown to Pharaoh's daughter, offers the child's own mother to be that nurse. Thus Moses' mother was able to keep her son by letting him go. And in this we glimpse the paradox of the Christian faith. He who wants to keep his life must lose it.

Where is God in this story? Whilst not mentioned, we are in no doubt that God is present behind the scenes and that the Hebrew midwives, Moses' mother and sister, Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants all do the will of God.

You can buy a 'Moses Basket' to put your baby in and this story from Exodus, in case you didn't know, is where the name comes from.

I often think that the hardest thing about being a mother is the letting go. The standing back and watching discreetly while your children learn from their mistakes. Our Lord does not dominate or control us, but rather guides and leads us, nurtures and cherishes us into the full and unique development of our lives in relationship with him and with each other. This is what 'mothering' is all about. Selflessly enabling and encouraging those in our care to become fine human beings and to worship God.

Mary is often held up as the mother exemplar but even she had her moments: When the twelve-year-old Jesus decided to do the will of God by going to see the elders in the Temple without telling her while everybody else had set off for home she says 'Where have you been! We've all been worried!' And in typical adolescent response to the anxiety he has caused Jesus says '*Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I must be here, in my Father's house?*'. You can imagine the temptation for Mary and Joseph to start dishing out the punishments because they would want to re-establish parental authority and Lord it over their errant son. This we must never do, but we will all have failed and slipped into the trap of smothering our precious children with our overbearing love for them.

The reading from Luke's gospel this morning shows us Mary's reaction when her son is identified as unique by Simeon in the Temple. Mary and Joseph 'were amazed!' All those of us who are parents like to be told that our children are 'special' and destined for great things but if we are open and honest with ourselves we will recognise that with greatness comes testing and times of distress. Mary is forewarned - a sword will pierce your own soul too. Mothers know how that feels, fathers and other carers too, the distress that can sometimes arise from allowing your children to pursue their own path. We all want to pray for our children but doing this properly means that we have to be prepared to trust in God

that he will be their guide better than us. We can only be the channels through which our Lord operates.

I'm surprised that the reading from Colossians does not continue to the end of the chapter. Paul's picture of how a Christian family ought to be includes the injunction for children to 'obey their parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.' What this depends on, and this is most important for mothers, fathers and all in the parental role, is that parents 'should not provoke their children'. The reason for this is that they might be discouraged, and this can be damaging. Even if it wasn't deliberate I'm sure we've all done it - in an exasperated moment when we feel our authority slipping away, we've pulled rank: 'because I said so!' - or made some other disparaging remark which has left our children crushed and our power over them asserted. And I'm also sure that most of us will remember being similarly stung by one or other of our own parents, and maybe we still smart, even years later at the memory of that humiliation.

Children obey your parents; parents do not goad your children.

The lubrication for human relationships, within families and without, is God's good grace. Be gracious to each other. I pray that all families gathered today to remember and give thanks for their mother-figures will be blessed with joy and peace. May they not have their times together spoiled by the reopening of old wounds. As Paul says: we should bear with each other, clothe ourselves with love so we can be bound together in perfect harmony. If anyone has a complaint against another we should forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven us. So today let us focus on those virtues. Set our hearts and minds to focus on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Rest together in the Lord. As you sit together at table or in your homes remember that the Lord is with you. Do everything in the name of Jesus, giving thanks through him, and I wish you all, through the love of our Saviour, a very happy Mothers' Day.

Amen