

Mothering Sunday ...

... a new family in Christ

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 27th March 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 19:25b-27

Mothering Sunday is a much more complicated business than at first you might think. What many people assume should be a straightforward matter of giving thanks for our mothers turns out to be much more difficult than that, because people's experiences of motherhood are so different: some of us have wonderful mothers; others less so; some of us may have wanted to be mothers; others became mothers without particularly wanting it; some want to be mothers, but have never had children; some mothers have sadly lost their children or been hurt by their children.

But if you go into a card shop at this time of year, you'd get the impression that motherhood is entirely wonderful and should be celebrated by everyone without reserve. So what I'm saying is that this is an occasion when it's difficult to strike exactly the right note. And because of that, some faithful Christians choose actually not to come to Church at all on this day.

When we look at this morning's Gospel reading, we can see a slightly more subtle take on this idea of motherhood.

On the one hand, we have Mary, the mother of Jesus. And if you like Mary as the mother of all mothers - the second Eve, the mother of the second person of the Trinity - if ever you want a reason to exalt and celebrate motherhood, look no further than Mary. But in this scene we see Mary at the foot of the cross, witnessing the suffering and death of her son, her own flesh and blood. It's hard to imagine a more dreadful scene. And we think of all of those mothers fleeing from Ukraine, forced to leave their sons behind them to fight on the front line. And we recognise in them something of Mary's pain and anguish.

On the other hand, we have the disciple '*whom Jesus loved*.' We don't actually know which of the twelve disciples this was, but John's Gospel often refers to the disciple '*whom Jesus loved*.' Some scholars think it might be John himself, but others think that this is a kind of 'every-man' figure, and that the disciple whom Jesus loved is a

representative of every Christian disciple, including you and me. We're not told anything about the beloved disciple's family: we don't know who his mother was or whether she was still around at this point.

But we have Mary, the mother of Jesus; we have the disciple whom Jesus loved; and in the middle we have Jesus himself dying on the cross. And when Jesus sees them, he says to his mother, "*Woman, here is your son.*" And he says to the disciple, "*Here is your mother.*" And we're told that from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

So do you see what's happening here? Here at the foot of the cross a new kind of family is being born - '*here is your son, here is your mother*' - a new mother and child relationship is taking shape, and it has nothing to do with flesh and blood or genetic inheritance or clan or tribe or nation or race. A new family is coming into being before our eyes, and it depends not on a literal physical birth, but on a relationship with Jesus. That relationship with Jesus is the result of a spiritual birth, a birth from heaven, what John calls being 'born again' by faith in Jesus. And that 'Jesus family' can include anyone - it can include everyone: all the way from Mary, who is literally the mother of Jesus, through to the Beloved Disciple, who not only has no blood relationship with Jesus, but appears to have no earthly family of his own at all. So if this 'Jesus family' can include the Beloved Disciple, it can certainly include you and me.

So let's reflect for a moment on our families.

Can you give thanks for your mother, who was your gateway into this world, through whom you received the gift of life? Isn't that a miracle? Let's not take it for granted, and let's not take the human agent who gave us life for granted. But are you also able to give thanks for your place in Jesus' family, the Church? Have you received the gift of life, which flows from the cross? That gift of forgiveness and reconciliation with God, the gift of God's unconditional love, the gift of a life filled with Grace? Can you acknowledge Mary as being in some sense your spiritual mother, the one whose example of trusting faith and openness to the Word of God, allowed the Son of God to take flesh and become real in the world for us?

On Mothering Sunday, we celebrate the creation of a new kind of family, and the invitation to you and me to become part of it. Note that Jesus assumes that Mary and

the Beloved Disciple already have a relationship with him, and so what he commands is not that they treat Jesus as family, but that they treat one another as family.

And that's important for us to hear. What we have here is not just the opportunity to know God as our heavenly Father through Jesus, the Son (if you like that's the easy bit) - much more difficult is the challenge to treat one another as family: "Woman, here is your son, son, here is your mother."

The Church community is one in which we recognise one another as family. We are involved with one another at a deep level, and there is a sense in which my salvation depends upon you, and that your salvation depends in some mysterious sense upon me. As children of God, we belong to one another. We take responsibility for one another: we weep together; we laugh together; we grow together.

And that's what Mothering Sunday is really celebrating - that 'something' we can all embrace and be excited by. So let's help one another to grow in this new life- let's, as it were, bring one another to birth; let's learn to see this wonderful community as in some sense our mother, the people all who bring one another to life in Christ.

Reading Text

John 19:25b-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.