

Sermon for Mothering Sunday

Rev Christopher Harrison, St Peter's church Nottingham, 11th March 2018

Today is often referred to as Mother's Day, although its correct name, at least in the Church, is Mothering Sunday. It is of course the day when for many families Mum is the centre of attention, and will – or at least should – receive flowers, cards, presents, and perhaps be taken out to a special meal.

The origins of Mothering Sunday, as far as we know, lie in the 16th century. On this day, the fourth Sunday of Lent, boys and girls who were working away from home returned to their homes and in particular to their mothers. This day also became a celebration of the Mother Church of the area; this was a name typically given to a large church which was the centre of a group of smaller village churches. In the annual cycle of the worship of the Church, however, the Fourth Sunday of Lent is also sometimes called 'Refreshment Sunday', or 'Rose Sunday'; it is a day on which the disciplines of Lent may be temporarily relaxed, and rose coloured vestments may be used (being a mixture of the colours violet and white). There is also sometimes a relaxation of the usual Lenten practice of not having flowers in church during this period.

Not everyone, however, finds Mothering Sunday easy. For some it's a day of celebration and thanksgiving; others, however, may feel that this day doesn't really mean very much, or, at worst, may even arouse difficult emotions. Amongst those who are here in St Peter's church today, some of you are of course mothers. There will be those among you who have found motherhood rewarding; others may have found it demanding and difficult. Some of you may be marking the first Mothering Sunday you've experienced as a mother, and be thanking God for the gift of a child. Others may have been mothers for a few years, and facing all the difficult decisions involved in juggling paid work and life at home. As life goes on, however, there are no doubt mothers who become saddened because of things that happen between them and their children; things may have occurred which are a cause for regret; there may be disappointments, dreams which are never realised, hopes which never came to fruition. One of the worst possible experiences for a mother, of course, is to lose her child, and on this Mothering Sunday we need to be especially aware of those who have had to tread this path of unimaginable sorrow.

Some mothers, however, may be genuinely full of gratitude that all the hard work which they have put into being a mother has actually enabled their children to become the kind of people they hoped they would become.

Others of you here today, of course, are not mothers, and perhaps will never be mothers. If you really long for the joys of motherhood, but know that this isn't going to be possible, a day like this can be very difficult. But there are also those who, for whatever reason, have taken on the kind of responsibilities which a mother would normally have, and we all need to value the love and care which such people give to those who depend upon them.

When we think of our own mothers, this is a day for giving thanks for joys shared over the years, for precious moments together, and for all the unstinting and sacrificial work done by mothers all over the world. But this can also be complex in that there are those who never knew their mothers, or who grew up in other kinds of family structures. Some people have difficult relationships with their mothers, or didn't have good experiences of growing up in general. This kind of beginning to your life can leave a massive and painful mark on you, and sometimes it's very difficult to get over such experiences, even during adulthood. Some of us have lost our mothers; this may even, for some of us, be the first Mothering Sunday without our mother.

There will no doubt also be people who are caring for elderly mothers; mothers who are not what they used to be in terms of their ability to live independently; sometimes they may seem to be very demanding; sometimes their personality seems to have changed, not always for the better. Or maybe your mother is far away and you don't see her as much as you'd like to, perhaps because of all the competing claims of work, family, or financial pressures.

As we come together in church on this Mothering Sunday, then, I hope we can be aware that we all bring our own perspective and experiences of mothers, of motherhood, of mothering. We must recognise our diversity in this regard as a fellowship of those who follow Christ, and actively celebrate this diversity. We must be there for those who find this day difficult, for whatever reason, as well as recognising and marking, in whatever seems right, the role our own mothers play or played in our lives.

Motherhood features quite prominently in the Gospels. In Jesus' mother Mary we see an obedient response to God's call to be a Mother; not any mother, of course, but the mother of the Son of God. Mary experienced the pain as well as the joys of motherhood, something which was predicted by the old man Simeon in the Temple at Jerusalem, when he told Mary that '...a sword will pierce your own heart'. We can imagine the fear and panic felt by Mary and Joseph when the boy Jesus was lost in Jerusalem; we can also visualise Jesus growing up and becoming independent of his parents. Later on in the gospels, we wonder what Mary felt when Jesus, now an adult, asked the people, 'Who are my mother, father, brother, sisters?' and went on to add that he saw all those who followed him as his family. Did that create sadness in Mary's heart, as she thought that she wasn't actually particularly special to her son?

Jesus must have understood a mother's feelings, however. Remember how he wept over Jerusalem, saying, 'How I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood'. Even on the cross, we see Jesus thinking about the well being of his mother when he entrusts her to John, who is generally thought to be the so-called beloved disciple. This reminds us that Jesus must have been well aware that sometimes families need to adapt to difficult and even tragic situations. When something happens to someone in a family, it may be that another person has to take their place. Through all these references to mothers and motherhood in the Gospels, then, we can see that God understands the challenges and responsibilities of being a mother, as well as all the complex dynamics – pressures, conflicts, moments of rejoicing, times of sadness – which characterise families today as well as no doubt in Jesus' time.

So finally, whatever you bring to this Mothering Sunday service, whether it be joy or sadness, anxiety or happiness, uncertainty or thanksgiving, loss or encouragement, let us offer all these emotions and experiences to God, as we join together around God's holy table and share in the Eucharist. Let us offer them to God, as we receive the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Christ which not only nourish us in our innermost being but also remind us that whoever we are, whatever we bring to God, God cares, God loves, God forgives, and God wants us all to share in the fullness of life which comes through faith and trust in our Saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.