

Today is Mothering Sunday; a really beautiful Festival for us to celebrate together and one that goes back into antiquity; originally a pagan festival, held in honour of the Mother goddess Cybele. After Constantine converted to Christianity, the Roman Empire began to celebrate it as a Christian Festival honouring Mother Church and the role she takes in nurturing, guiding and encouraging her children to grow and mature.

Over time however, the focus moved away from the Church to human mothers, and the tradition of giving flowers on this day. A practice which comes from domestic staff from large Estates visiting mothers on their time off after church and picking flowers from the hedgerows on the way to give them. That's a long way from what Mother's Day has become now, a commercial event. But it is really a beautiful and thought-provoking Sunday in the midst of our Lent austerities.

Not everyone finds Mothering Sunday an easy or uplifting time. For some, the very term 'mother' is incredibly difficult. There are those who dread Mother's Day because they would have loved to have become mothers themselves but it didn't happen. Loss and bereavement is entwined with this day, not only due to childlessness, but also for those who have lost children, through early death, still-birth, miscarriage, or termination. There's also the pain of a loss of a mother through death, or even through the experience of a condition like dementia or Alzheimer's. Sometimes today there is a presumption that Mothers should be universally honoured. This can be very difficult if the very person that should have been protecting their children ended up neglecting or abusing them.

So for some, Mothering Sunday isn't just one of the hardest of days on which to come to church; it's also one of the hardest days on which to stand here in the pulpit and find a message to deliver that will offer something for everyone: a word of healing for those whose family relationships or memories are clouded, a word of affirmation and thanksgiving for mothers, motherhood and parenting in general.

Our Bible readings this morning offer two possible starting points, rooted in the stories of Moses and Jesus and their respective mothers.

Moses' mother had to hide him from the cruelty of Pharaoh. She manages to keep him hidden for three months, but she knows that she can't keep him safe for much longer. And so, desperately entrusting his future to God, she lets him go. Creating a tiny floating basket, she hides him in the reeds at the water's edge;

where he is found and rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who unwittingly employs the baby's own mother as a royal nanny to raise him to adulthood.

How painful it must have been for his natural mother, when the boy was older, to take him to the princess to be formally adopted as her son. But by letting go and trusting God she had seen him grow up into a young adult. And none of those involved can have foreseen the consequences: how a mother's trust and a princess's kindness would produce such a powerful leader: one who would be God's agent in securing the release of his people from slavery.

Our short second reading tells us what happened when Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the Temple for his dedication. It's nothing like as dramatic as the story of Moses' childhood, but the day doesn't seem to go quite as expected. It was the equivalent of a christening today – it ought to have been a pleasant family event that they would look back on with affection and pride for years to come.

But, something unexpected happens. They are confronted by a couple of elderly people, Simeon and Anna. These old people immediately realise that Jesus is someone of exceptional importance. Simeon begins prophesying about the hardships that lie ahead for the little one. And finally he turns to Mary and says, "And a sword will pierce your own heart also".

Mary experienced the agony of watching as an actual spear entered Jesus' side, and it must have felt as if her own heart was being pierced. When we start a family, we can't predict what form that spear might take for us, whether it will involve loss, sickness, alienation, or simply the collective impact of a thousand smaller anxieties over health, schooling, family relationships, career choices, and all the other ups and downs of life parents and children go through together. And however good our intentions, all parents make mistakes, some of which will haunt them for years. Like Moses' mother, we can only put our hope and trust in God.

Mary also put her trust in God; without Mary saying 'yes' to God, Jesus wouldn't have been born. Mary was amazed at the things that were said about Jesus when he was still a baby. She was warned that she would suffer because he would suffer. We learn in a family when one person suffers all share in the pain: mothers often suffer deeply for their children. It's not just sleepless nights and giving time and attention; it is the pain in a mother's heart at the suffering of her child.

As we look towards Holy Week and the cross, we see what that meant. I'm sure as Mary stood by her dying son she would remember Simeon's earlier words and she would feel that sword pierce her soul. She would have given anything to swap places with him because that's the fierce love that is created between parent and child. For many, perhaps most of us, parenthood will have proved a joy and a blessing. But for everyone who ever tries to start a family – whether or not they succeed in their efforts - there's a health warning on the side of the package that says, "A Sword Will Pierce Your Heart".

And that's the cue for a final challenge to all of us. Remember, Pharaoh's daughter became a mother to Moses, and shared all the joy and grief of his tumultuous coming of age, through nothing more than the kindness of her heart and the mixed blessing of having been in the right place at the right time. Similarly, when Jesus was dying on the Cross, he saw his mother Mary and the John standing there together, and he encouraged them to act as a mother and son to one another. Which brings us back to Mothering Sunday as a celebration of Mother Church, for part of the wonder of this extended church family is the opportunity we have to act like family to one another: like parents, like grandparents, like children or like siblings; to accept our differences and support one another through life's ups and downs. This mirrors the great love that God has for each one of us. Remember, we can feel alone and forgotten, but we know that God is with us and will never forsake us. We can bring to Him all that we hold: our fears, our grief, our disappointments and our sufferings and He will hold them with us. In Jesus name. Amen.