

Mothering Sunday, 22 March 2009 and 18 March 2012

Grief and Sorrow

Exodus 2, 1-10; 2 Cor. 1, 3-7; Luke 2, 33-35

Today we are half way through Lent and have therefore reached Mothering Sunday. The mediaeval church used to call today Laetare Sunday, that is rejoicing Sunday, when rose-pink instead of purple vestments were worn for the services during this self-denying period of 40 days. It is also called Refreshment Sunday, when we are allowed some relaxation from the Lenten fast to enjoy, if we are lucky, simnel cakes. More generally on this day in the past people were released from their usual Sunday devotions to go and visit their mother, perhaps at some great distance, or to visit their mother or cathedral church, Jerusalem being the “mother of all” churches. How wonderfully the church divides up the year and gives us a regular little series of pegs on which we can hang our lives !

If you walk into one of London’s great open spaces, in this case, Grosvenor Square, you will see on the western side the American Embassy, looking today more and more like a heavily fortified castle with its road blocks and armed policemen, and all that those things stand for. If you walk across to the eastern side, there is a very different sight. Standing in its own specially created garden is a distinguished memorial to the victims of 9/11, with special seats, a long list of the names of all those who died, and running across the top in large letters, the inscription “GRIEF IS THE PRICE WE PAY FOR LOVE”.

On the one side of the square there is constant shouting and demonstrations; on the other, a tranquil haven to those we have lost.

If Moses was a thinking baby, he might have recognised something similar. A monstrous and inhumane Pharaoh whose only concern was to retain power by murdering all the baby boys born in Egypt and throwing them into the River Nile. But his daughter was quite the reverse – in her we see the humanity she shows for the alien child that she rescues before he goes to his doom. Pharaoh’s power was undermined by the weakest people in his society – that is, the Hebrew midwives. Their commitment to God and their motherly compassion led to freedom. Moses achieved what Pharaoh had dreaded.

Family groups are not straightforward. Moses' mother saw the danger to herself and her son in a hostile culture. But because she was canny she found an alternative to his being killed. It all looks like a story with a happy ending, yet we know that when Moses grew up he was thrown out for murdering a slave master. But through this act and his later obedience to God, the children of Israel were taken out of slavery and into the promised land. And all this happened because of a mother's concern for her child, and because she did something in a dangerous way, taking a great risk so that her son might live. She did what every mother must do – protect her child and watch over his development to maturity. She did the right things at the right time.

Perhaps we should be more imaginative in our approach to families and to relationships and to taking risks. The nuclear family of mother, father and 2.4 children is rapidly disappearing into the history books. We see it rarely if at all in the Bible. No – rather we see concubines, various wives and extended families – and families which are open to bringing in others to care for them on a decidedly non-nuclear basis.

How many aged mothers are now in homes and not looked after by their own children, and perhaps not even visited? Can we find again the extended family which is not narrowly defined and exclusive, but open and inclusive? Then perhaps we can affirm relationships that go beyond the narrow perception of what a family is. Then we can recommit ourselves to being an open and loving community.

One thing that we can learn from other cultures, and in particular the Arab world, is their respect for old people and the wisdom and experience that they can bring to younger generations. It is quite the ordinary thing to see large family groups with elderly parents or grandparents all living together. It seems that in such countries the pressing need for old people's homes is very different from here in England.

St Paul tells us that God consoles us so that we might console others and share our own suffering and afflictions. The servants of Christ share in his sorrows which overflow from Him to us; as we share in his dying we are exposed to his weaknesses, and therefore also to his divine consolation. That wonderful and overflowing consolation which we can then impart to others. A trouble shared is a trouble halved, and a joy told is a joy doubled.

We reflect on the joys and sorrows of motherhood, and give thanks for the care of the church and God's loving nature. Parents always worry about their children – how they will grow up, with their own joys and

sorrows. True love for anybody involves great joy – and also pain and heartache. To love is to work hard, as St Paul tells us. To love means making ourselves vulnerable in self-giving, and sharing emotionally in other people's lives. And sometimes, perhaps always, grief is the price we pay for love. Homer the Greek poet saw this, and he also saw the dilemma of a parent losing a child. He describes it so well when the great King Priam had to go begging to mighty Achilles for the return of the body of his murdered son Hector.

And so today, for some families there are chocolates and roses in celebration of the joys of motherhood, perhaps as a thank-you from children who recognize her years of selfless work in bringing them up.

There will be mothers mothers here in the congregation – those who have had the inexpressible joy of giving birth to a tiny baby and seen the beginning of a new life – the tiny hands opening and closing, unaware of what they might receive. And they have wondered what might lie in store for that child in the future – hopes and dreams of what is to come, and perhaps for what the mother never had herself.

But equally, some people here today have perhaps not been given the opportunity or the ability to become mothers themselves. For them it may be a day of rather mixed feelings. Others may have lost children or become estranged from them. Some may be weighed down with worry about children or parents. Some may be estranged from their own parents, and some may be experiencing the pain of the death of a mother - or of a father. In the past few months the congregation of St Peter's has witnessed the deaths of several church members. A group of families close to us are all now in mourning.

For those mothers no longer with us we have a mixture of feelings – sorrow and grief, but also happiness for the joy for their memory. Through it all Jesus offers us hope – he lay dead in his mother's arms, but then rose again triumphantly.

When John Wesley was a little boy of 6 he was saved when his father's rectory at Epworth was destroyed in a great fire. His mother Susanna saw a sign from God in his deliverance and then vowed to be "more particularly careful of the soul of this child". Wesley much later said that his mother did not feel for others nearby so much as his father did, but she did ten times more than he did. Well, we all know what Wesley went onto become, and might now wonder how much his life was influenced

by his mother. His long life was one of both tremendous sorrows and tremendous joys as he battled to preach God's word to the unconverted.

Some of you may know Michelangelo's extraordinary masterpiece in shimmering white Carrara marble – the Pieta, where Mary grieves over her son, the dead Christ. If you find today hard, think of Mary's hands over the body of her dead son, not a baby but a grown man, her left hand embracing his body, and her right showing acceptance of God's will. Sorrow and the hope of future joy all at the same time.

St Luke in today's gospel reading gives Mary a mother's worst possible news – that her son is going to be rejected and die, and that she will be pierced in her heart as well. How must she have felt? What hopes and dreams were suddenly shattered? Simeon's blessing was the consolation of Israel under harsh Roman rule. Those due to rise again were currently oppressed. A sword, the instrument of the conqueror, would pass through the land just as the crucifixion would pierce Mary's soul. Those who accepted Christ would rise again, and those who rejected him would not.

The gospel, like our lives, is full of highs and lows, and of great contrasts and choices : judgment and salvation; darkness and light; suffering and healing; falsehood and truth; good and evil; heaven and hell; death and resurrection.

Our Lord cares for us as his children, and shares our joys and pains. But on the other hand he can bring new life into the world and release us and our communities to discover life in its fullness. We are not promised an easy life, because we can never expect anything different from what he suffered. He offers us choices and challenges. Following him means a spiritual, physical and emotional struggle. But he does promise to be with us!

Let us pray today for all mothers everywhere, for those who rejoice and those who grieve. And may God bless the unique and precious gift of motherhood.