

Sermon for Mothering Sunday 14th March 2021, by Prebendary Kay Garlick

Many years ago, I was preparing a service for our local church on Mothering Sunday. I wrote a sermon and some prayers about the debt we owed to our mothers, I got the children involved, asking them to talk about how important their mothers were, and the service turned out to be very lively and positive, and I felt quite self-satisfied at my efforts. And then, a couple of days later, I received a chastening and humbling letter from someone who had been there. He wanted to point out that not everyone has such good memories of their own mother - that for him the service had stirred up emotions of anger and bitterness and sorrow, and he had felt more alone and unheard than ever before. Of course, I went to see him and we talked honestly together, and as so often happens, there was some good that came out of such an error of judgement on my part, but it made me think.

For all sorts of reasons, it may not be our own mother who has done the mothering for us. Of course, in most cases it is, and it is good that today we give thanks for that. But today is Mothering Sunday, not just Mother's Day (which is an American invention), and on Mothering Sunday we give thanks for Mothering: for the mothering of the Church, the mothering of Mary, and for the mothering we have experienced in our own lives.

In Medieval times to "go a-mothering" was the name used for the pilgrimage journey taken once a year in Lent to the "home" church - the church where someone had been baptised, or to the Cathedral (the Mother Church) of that place. Children had often left home at a very early age to go to work as domestic servants or agricultural workers, and once a year they were given a Sunday off to go back to their Mother church, and so of course it was a chance too for families to get together. It became the custom for children to collect wild flowers on their way home to give to their mothers when they arrived.

That Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, was also called Refreshment Sunday because the fasting rules of Lent were relaxed for the day, and that meant that families could feast together and enjoy each other's company before returning to their workplaces

And so on Mothering Sunday we celebrate and give thanks for Mother Church, for Mary, mother of Jesus, and for those who have mothered us in our lives.

What are the characteristics of this "mothering" that we give thanks for today? And how do we see those characteristics in the Church, in Mary and in those who have mothered us? First of all, mothering is about giving life.

Baptism is described as giving "new life in Christ" and that is why the Church where someone is baptised is known as their "mother church".

Mary gave life to Jesus - her saying "yes" to God in spite of the risks involved, led to the birth of Christ and all that followed.

When we think who has "mothered" us in our lives, it will be someone who gave us life - maybe through birth, but in other ways too they enabled us to live full lives.

Mothering is also about protecting.

The Church has always been seen as a sanctuary - indeed historically a person fleeing even from the authorities could claim sanctuary in the church. If they could just get as far as the sanctuary knocker, they were safe. The Church is understood as a safe place for all.

Mary, with Joseph, protected Jesus from the start with their flight into Egypt to escape Herod's massacre of small children. And there is a wonderful 13th century picture of Mary punching the devil in the face, no doubt to keep him away from her son.

Who was it that protected us when we were young and vulnerable?

Mothering is about nurturing - helping the other to grow through teaching, listening, comforting, encouraging, and enabling

The Church has a mothering role of nurturing both those within the church and those outside. Work with the poor and marginalised is as important as nurturing the Church family.

In the Gospels we have just a few verses that speak volumes about the nurturing that Mary did for the young Jesus to prepare him for adult life.

"when they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 239-40)

And we can identify those who have helped us to grow and develop through their care and example.

Most would agree that the most difficult part of mothering is the letting go - because it is not just waving goodbye and getting on with our own lives - it is that difficult paradox of letting go and yet staying alongside.

The Church has to learn to let go - to accept that some will want to follow Christ in a different way, that some will follow other paths, that some will reject everything the church offers, and yet the Church must still stand alongside all when they are in need.

We remember that apparent rejection suffered by Mary as she waits outside a house asking for her son, and when they tell Jesus, *"Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you,"* she hears him say *"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."* Mary has to let Jesus go into a ministry which takes him away from her and the family, and leads in just a few years to his death on a cross. But there she still is - standing by the cross as he dies and taking him in her arms when his body is lowered. And in our Gospel reading today, we heard Christ's words from the cross telling her that now she must be mother to his friend instead.

Many human "motherers" find it terribly difficult to let go of those they love - that's where the word "smother" comes in! We want to hold on to those we have raised - to keep control - to keep them safe. But we need to let them go to make their own decisions, their own mistakes, their own achievements, and yet be there alongside ready to help when they are struggling.

Who are the people who have played that hard role in our lives?

We have thought about the mothering Church, the mothering Mary, and the people who have mothered us and shaped our own lives for good. But as we look at the attributes of mothering, we see that because all these attributes come from love, so Love itself - God - is the best example of all.

Right back in the 14th century, Julian of Norwich in her Revelations of Divine Love spoke of God as Mother. "As truly as God is our father, so just as truly is he our mother."

We worship a God who gives us life in all its fullness - who protects and guides and nurtures us - who gives us the freedom to make choices and forgives us when we make the wrong ones - who is always with us, *"even to the end of time."* We call him Lord and Father and we can also rightly call him Mother - the one who comforts us as a mother comforts her children (Isaiah 66v13) and who *longs to put his arms around us just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings*, if only we will let him.