

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2026**

**Mothering Sunday**

*Exodus 2:1-10; Psalm 34; Colossians 3:12-17; John 19: 25b-27*

About ten days ago there was a widely run news item telling us that words such as “ambitious” or “competitive” are too masculine to be included in job advertisements. The Office for Equality and Opportunity suggested that such words can deter women from applying for jobs. This Office has an aversion to what they describe as stereotypically male pushiness: it is latent misogyny apparently. A leading article in a national newspaper said: “Fine sentiments to mark International Women’s Day last Sunday. Did Margaret Thatcher rise to the top of her party and seize the highest office with her self-effacing reticence, her career hopes concealed beneath the carapace of a shrinking violet?” No! (Not that I personally wish to uphold the Iron Lady as the epitome of womanhood...) But it is a point well made. Why might we feel the need to protect, wrap in cottonwool all women because they are women? Why do we insist on such narrow definitions and usages of particular words? Both these questions are relevant to this Sunday’s themes.

I wonder what those who protect us from such imagined and hidden dangers would say about some of today’s readings, given that this Sunday, Mothering Sunday, is one where we might expect children and families to be present. Today we begin with the story of Moses being left in the river amongst the reeds and bullrushes because Pharaoh has ordered the killing of all young baby Hebrew boys. There’s a nice start for today: the massacre of baby boys and the abandonment of a child to an unknown fate. An excellent bedtime story.... Today’s psalm begins, “Come children and hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” How many schools these days would leap happily on such a text for

inclusion in their curriculum? Even if this is promoting the fear of God, for whom at least a healthy respect might be desirable, the word fear as something to be taught is quite enough to send the scrutineers of appropriate language into overdrive. And today's gospel focuses on that unspeakably terrible scene of crucifixion as Jesus, dying in agony, commends his mother to his best friend's care and vice versa. None of it flies off the page as happy children's literature, or indeed happy family literature, on a day that promotes mothering and families.

Today is a day of thanksgiving and celebration for our mothers, especially if we have been blessed enough to experience unconditional love from our own mother. However, it immediately becomes a very difficult day for those whose experience has not been positive, and difficult for those who have never been able to become mothers, and those whose mothers have recently died. If we stay with the day's original title of "Mothering Sunday" (rather than the popular preference for Mothers' Day) it becomes apparent that the word mother is a verb. To mother means to provide care, protection, nurture, affection and love. Not only is it possible for any woman to provide such care, regardless of whether she has given birth, it is also possible for a man to offer the same. As I have said from this pulpit on several previous occasions, our own children gave cards and gifts to me and my husband on Mothering Sunday. They recognised us both as capable of this kind of love. All human beings can offer this love. If we go back to the origins of Mothering Sunday we discover that people were honouring their mother church, the church where they were baptised, the church that taught them through Sunday Schools and nurtured them as they grew up, the church community which, at its best, acted as a kind of extended family. That is us, collectively. Mothering is not only done by individuals, but also by whole communities. Today we celebrate that mothering.

Nowadays there are several alternative patterns for families. Apart from obvious examples such as those who adopt and those who foster, children may now have two women as parents and equally two men. In these cases each person contributes the expected traits of both mother and father regardless of gender. Today's Bible readings pave the way for alternative groupings. Moses was found by Pharaoh's daughter, and although his own mother, most fortuitously, becomes his wet-nurse, he was brought up thereafter within the Egyptian court and so educated in moral duties and good manners as well as reading, writing and arithmetic in the Egyptian way. He was well cared for, but not by his birth mother. And from the cross, Jesus, seeing the agonising distress of both his mother and his best friend, gives one to the other in a new reality of love. Each will care for the other.

I have recently read a beautiful book called "Raising Hare" as in the animal that looks much like a rabbit and not in hair-raising where one's hair stands on end. Not that! The author, Chloe Dalton, found a baby hare, a leveret, and despite having no credentials whatever for doing such a thing, she raised this tiny animal during the pandemic. Not only is the book beautifully written, it describes a beautiful process as a bond of trust develops between human and animal. She never tries to humanise her tiny charge and never tries to make it her pet. Always with an eye to its return to the wild, she allows it the run of her house and small garden, bordering on countryside. She "mothers" this wonderful creature in the fullest possible sense of that word, without ever smothering it or trying to make it something it isn't. Inevitably she lets it go and it's painfully hard to do. We do all that we can, mothers, fathers, carers, all who nurture and love throughout the long journey from total dependence to independence, in order that the child (or the animal in the case of the

hare) will cope as well as it possibly can on its own, away from the hands and arms that have held it safe.

Jesus, dying on the cross, is saying to Mary and to John “Let me go.” They, and the embryonic church about to form around them when Jesus is no longer physically there, are now grown-up enough followers of Christ’s way to move on to the next stage in their journey. But the letting go is agony. No wonder many composers have set the words “Stabat Mater”, meaning “the sorrowful mother was standing” (at the foot of the cross), from the simple poignancy of Pergolesi onwards. Imagining Mary goes beyond words and music can take us to that “beyond”. There is the utter helplessness of the mother as she watches her son die, witnessed again and again on our television screens as mothers and fathers mourn so many deaths in Iran, Lebanon, Gaza, Ukraine. In a world that promotes control and autonomy, helplessness is one of the most difficult emotions to deal with. Yet it is a feeling encountered many times throughout the process of motherhood. Motherhood is not all sweetness and light. It’s difficult, demanding and challenging and sometimes demands so-called tough love. Is that phrase man or woman appropriate? Ridiculous to try and say... but the kind of love that does not court popularity with treats but is prepared to say no when upholding standards, however unpopular.

In today’s epistle, Paul gives us a pattern of attitudes and behaviour that lie at the heart of any healthy community. Beginning with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, he develops a crescendo to the word love “which binds everything together in perfect harmony” and leads to peace. If ever the world needed such a pattern, here is the antidote to hatred and violence. Anyone involved in mothering would want to protect their child from the devastation of hatred and violence filling our television screens daily. Jesus,

likening himself to a mother hen, said to the people of Jerusalem according to Matthew:

“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing.” How often can we all, male and female, identify with that desire to protect and to gather into one safe community all the young, the vulnerable, the weak and the elderly? St Paul’s values are the building blocks with which we can create a safe community – family, church, village, school – in which all, and especially our young people may flourish and grow into the individuals they are destined to be.

Such communities, however, cannot be inward-looking. Over-protection such as the banning of certain words will not prepare anyone for the world as it is. So today’s readings are entirely appropriate to all ages in that they describe the world as it is. They are real, and mothering is about preparing young people to face reality about themselves and about the world of which they are a part. The new community that began with Mary and John at the foot of the cross is a force-field of costly self-giving. There is no room for sentimentality in a community founded in the cross. The spiritual writer Martin L. Smith wrote of these few verses: “In the Christian mystery love itself must be crucified, must die to be reborn as love set free. The evangelist points to the new home of the beloved disciple as the place where this has happened, the household from which the church’s authentic identity has its origin.” Our challenge today is to carry that authentic identity out into today’s world and especially to those places and people that have not known the love of a mother, or who have no mother to comfort them through pain and desolation. With gratitude in our hearts as St Paul bids us, may we, as Christ’s church, carry this love in his name to all who suffer in any way. We pray with today’s collect that “in joy and in sorrow they may know the power of God’s presence to bind together and to heal.” Amen.